Bestseller Mystery

BLACK PLUMES

by Margery Allingham

"One of the best books by a mystery novelist whose work is always of first rank." NEW YORK TIMES

25¢

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

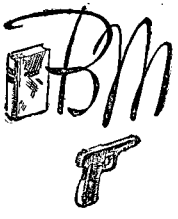
BLACK PLUMES

by

MARGERY ALLINGHAM

LAWRENCE E. SPIVAK
Publisher

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Titles for the Bestseller Mysteries are chosen from those books which have had a large and continuing sale. Sometimes they are reprinted in full, but more often they are cut to speed up the story — always, of course, with the permission of the author or his publisher. This book has been cut.

Bestseller Mystery, No. B33 . . . 570 Lexington Avenue, New York.
Manufactured in the United States of America.

Copyright, 1940, by Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc. Reprinted by special arrangement with Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CHAPTER ONE

THE OCTOBER WIND hesitated in its reckless flight to hurl a handful of fine drops at the windows of the drawing room in the big Hampstead house. The sound was sharp and spiteful, so that the silence between the two women within became momentarily shocked, as if it had received some gratuitous if trivial insult.

Old Mrs. Gabrielle Ivory continued to watch her granddaughter. Her eyes were bright still, as shrewd and black as they had been on an evening nearly seventy years before when they had refused to drop before the stare of another dominant woman who had sat on a little gilt throne at the first Court of the season. Gabrielle Ivory had been quite as forceful as Queen Victoria in her way and certainly very much more beautiful, but now, as she sat in her high chair, surrounded by a lacquer screen and swaddled in grey satin, she was very old.

The girl standing on the rug before her was barely twenty, yet there was a very definite likeness between them. The eldest and the youngest of the Ivorys both had the family's beauty, the fine bones and that expression which was sometimes called "straightforward" and sometimes "arrogant."

"Well?" said Gabrielle. "I'm an old woman, my dear, nearly ninety. It's not much use coming to me. That's what you're thinking, isn't it?"

Frances Ivory's long narrow grey eyes flickered. The old lady was devastatingly right, and it was not going to be easy to explain the sense of dismay which had crept over her at the discovery. Meyrick Ivory, a widower who adored his mother, had brought up his younger daughter to see the old Gabrielle as an almost legendary figure. To his child she had always been presented as the beloved beauty of a golden age, a link with the great Victorians, a creature larger than life in power and importance, so that all through these last perturbing weeks Frances had comforted herself with the recollection that if the worst came to the worst, even though Meyrick himself was half across the world, there was always Gabrielle up at Hampstead. It was hard to realise, now that the moment of appeal had come, that she was perhaps just a very old woman, too old and too tired to be disturbed.

The tiny figure in the high chair stirred impatiently.

"Meyrick is not expected back from China for some time, is he?" she remarked. "How is Robert Madrigal behaving without him? I never liked that young man. Why your insane half sister married him I cannot imagine. Not a very suitable person to be in charge of The Gallery." She gave the title

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the capital letters which were its due. From the early years of the last century, when her own father-in-law, the famous Philip Ivory, had first purchased the fine house off St. James's and had exhibited there the collection of Gainsboroughs, 39 Sallet Square had been The Gallery and so it was still, with a history of wealth and prestige behind it unequalled in Europe.

"Well?" The old woman was persistent. "How is he behaving?"

Frances hesitated. "He and Phillida are staying with me at 38, you know," she began cautiously. "It was Meyrick's idea. He wanted Robert to be near."

Mrs. Ivory's narrow lips curled. The mention of the house next door to The Gallery, where she had reigned throughout her career, always stirred her.

"So Phillida's at 38, is she?" she said. "Meyrick didn't tell me that. You're finding it difficult to live with her, I suppose? I don't blame you. I could never abide a fool in the house. What has she done now?"

"No, it's not Phillida," said Frances slowly. "No, darling, I only wish it were." There was a great deal more to worry about than the shortcomings of her elder half sister. "Granny," she began awkwardly, realising that the words were childish and inadequate, "there's something going on."

Gabrielle laughed. It was a little tinkling sound, as gently malicious as ever it had been in the great drawing rooms of long ago.

"There always was," she said.

"Yes, I know, but this is rather different." Frances was taking the plunge. "This is deliberate malice and it's dangerous. I'm terrified of sounding melodramatic and silly but I really do think that something irrevocable may happen at any minute and something must be done to stop it. There's nobody to go to, you see. The staff at The Gallery is going to pieces. You can't blame them in the circumstances . . ."

"Oh, my dear, not business." The old woman's protest contained distaste. "Leave business to men. When I was your age we thought it rather indelicate for females to understand business. You should marry. Phillida has no children — a mercy, of course, if there's anything in heredity — but someone must carry on. Come and talk to me about marriage, not business."

Frances stiffened. Her suspicion was founded. There was going to be no help here. She turned away.

"Robert has just told me I ought to marry Henry Lucar," she said. It had not occurred to her that Gabrielle might recognise the name, since Meyrick would hardly have mentioned so unimportant a member of the firm to his mother. The rustle in the high chair came as a surprise therefore.

"Wasn't that the man who was rescued from Godolphin's expedition?" demanded the old lady. "I thought he was a baggageman in charge of the camels, or was it mules?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The girl laughed in spite of herself. "Oh no, darling," she said. "Be fair. He did go out as Robert's batman, as a matter of fact, but that's nothing to do with it. He came back a hero and he's in the firm now. I don't like him. Since Daddy's been away I've liked him less. He was always a bit of a smart aleck but just lately he's surpassed himself, cocky little beast. Still, it really isn't snobbery that's made me go on turning him down. I wouldn't care what he was if I liked him. I just don't, that's all."

She was speaking defensively, repeating the argument she had used to Robert at that astonishing interview just before lunch.

Gabrielle sat up. Marriage was a subject which her generation had entirely understood, and her bright eyes were hard.

"Did this person have the impudence to ask you to marry him?" she enquired.

Frances writhed. The *démodé* snobbery embarrassed her. It was so like great age to get the whole thing out of perspective and to pounce upon a single aspect.

"There was nothing impudent about it, darling," she protested. "It was only that when Robert began to badger me to take the horrid little brute seriously I added it to these other more serious things that have been happening and I got the wind up. You can't blame Lucar for merely asking. Why shouldn't he?"

"Why? Don't be a fool, girl, and don't forget yourself. This man Lucar is a servant, or was a servant until a gratuitous piece of good fortune saved his life and made him notorious. You are a pretty, well-bred, well-educated girl with a great deal of money. It is a ridiculous modern affectation to pretend to disregard money. It does not deceive anybody. No one thinks of anything else at heart. Your mother left you two hundred thousand pounds. That is a fortune. Of course it's impudence for the man Lucar to ask you to marry him. Any man who proposes to you is going to be in an embarrassing position unless he is either very wealthy himself or has some special advantage which makes the exchange fair and respectable. Robert appears to be out of his mind. I shall certainly speak to Meyrick when he returns."

She lay back, closing her eyes after the effort, and the girl stood looking at her, her cheeks flaming. A great deal has been written about the forthrightness of the moderns shocking the Victorians, but there is no shock like the one which the forthrightness of the Victorians can give a modern.

Frances came away.

Meyrick's Rolls had never seemed more comfortingly magnificent. The interview had been worse than useless, and she reproached herself for attempting it. She was frightened. That discovery was alarming in itself. It is one

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thing to go on from day to day with a growing feeling of unrest and suspicion, but quite another to find oneself suddenly convinced of serious trouble and to be in charge, especially when one is not quite twenty and one is alone.

The chauffeur drew up outside 38, but she signalled to him not to ring. If Phillida was still there the chances were that she was still in bed with drawn blinds and her latest medico in attendance.

She left the car and walked on down to The Gallery, which opened austere arms to greet her. At first blush 39 Sallet Square, where one could negotiate anything from a castleful of Rembrandts to a humble modern woodcut, was a cool and lovely private house. At the moment, however, the normal elegance of the building was ruffled. The girl, who was already apprehensive, noticed the changed atmosphere as soon as she set foot in the hall.

CHAPTER TWO

"OF COURSE. It's a serious thing and naturally Mr Field is furious."

Miss Dorset leaned back in her chair in the secretary's office and her thin face flushed.

"What painter wouldn't be angry if he was rung up by a gallery in the middle of an exhibition and calmly told that one of his best pictures had been slashed? Oh, Miss Ivory, I do wish your father was back."

She was one of those thin women who had once been sandy and she had grown old in the service of the firm without anyone noticing it, not even herself.

"Is David Field here?" Frances' tone betrayed her, but the other woman was in no mood to notice it.

"Of course he is. They're all up in Mr Meyrick's office talking it over, making a fuss and giving Mr Field something to tell everyone in London. Formby's story has made everything only too clear, and a very dreadful thing it is too. It's that big portrait of the Mexican dancer, number sixty-four."

"I don't understand. Did Formby see who did it?" Frances was bewildered. Formby, the commissionaire, had been with the firm for years and it seemed hardly possible that any such unparalleled active violence could have taken place under his nose.

Miss Dorset did not look at her. "He insists that everything was all right at two o'clock when he went into the big gallery to speak to Mr Robert, who was there talking to Mr Lucar. When they came out about fifteen minutes later he went back again and found the damage. He gave the alarm and North

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

phoned Mr Field. It's just like all the other outrages, malicious, dangerous and obvious."

"Does Formby actually say that nobody else was in there except Robert and Lucar, and that they were together? Does he see what that means?"

"Don't ask me." Miss Dorset's suppressed agitation lent her a certain defiant rakishness. "I've worked for your father since I was seventeen and I've got a great respect for him. I've been making up my mind to go out of my place and write the truth to him ever since the Royal Catalogue affair. Now I'm not so sure that I ought not to send a cable. This is a very wonderful old firm with a great tradition and it's a shame to see it floundering in the hands of a lunatic, if he's nothing worse."

Frances went slowly upstairs. The door to Meyrick's private office was open, and she paused in the corridor.

"Can your people downstairs repair the thing, Madrigal? How long are they likely to be about it?"

The voice was not unexpected and Frances was irritated to find herself jolted by it. David Field was reputed to jolt a great many women in his casual, friendly passage through life. She went forward briskly, but the heavy carpet deadened her footsteps and she stood on the threshold unobserved.

The white-panelled room, once an eighteenth-century duchess' boudoir, looked odd with Robert sitting behind the big desk and Lucar lounging idly by his side. Of all the unprepossessing people she had ever met Frances was inclined to give Lucar first place. He was a pip-squeak of a man, inclined already to fatness, with red hair and a red face which clashed with it. Yet even these defects might have been tolerable had it not been for his conceit. He alone of the group looked perfectly pleased with himself. Robert was even more nervy than usual. His coffin-shaped face was grey, he was punching small holes in the blotting paper with a dry pen, and his hand was shaking.

Formby was standing solidly with his back to her, and in the armchair beside him there was a tall thin figure at whom Frances did not look. She was not given to shyness in the ordinary way but she did not glance at David Field.

"Don't worry, Mr Field. We'll patch it up for you." It was Lucar who spoke, and his jauntiness was insulting. "It may be out of the show for a day or two, but there you are. It can't be helped, can it?"

Robert cut in at once. "You can rely on us absolutely. We shall see to it immediately," he said hastily. "I can't tell you how shocked and horrified we all are that such an accident should have occurred to such a fine picture when it was in our care."

"You're insured, of course?" Field put the question absently and an awkward pause ensued.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes, we are, naturally. Fully." There were unaccustomed spots of colour in Robert's cheeks. "Naturally. But in this particular circumstance, I mean in view of the slightness of the damage, I think a claim would hold up the repair work unnecessarily. After all, we do want the canvas on show, don't we? That's the main thing."

It was a bad cover-up and very obvious. Field rose and his lean figure was silhouetted against the light.

"Look here, Madrigal, exactly what sort of accident was it?"

It was an invitation to frankness typical of the man, yet Robert did not avail himself of it.

"I have no idea," he said stiffly. "No idea at all."

The painter shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, all right," he said. "I'm probably a fool, but get it repaired and back in its place by the end of the week and we'll forget the incident. But meanwhile, for the love of Mike, do look after the stuff. Meyrick Ivory was a good friend to me when I was beginning, and I don't want to hurt the old man, but these things are painted in blood and sweat. I can't let 'em be carved up indiscriminately. One more disaster and we'll have to call the show off."

Lucar opened his mouth. He had a curious self-conscious wriggle of the shoulders before making one of his more unforgivable utterances and fortunately Robert saw it coming.

"Quite," he said quickly. "Quite. North is upstairs now arranging for it to be taken down. Perhaps you would go up to him, Lucar. Impress it on him that he must take every possible care. It's a terrible thing to have happened."

Lucar shrugged his shoulders. He slid off the edge of the desk where he had been sitting and, turning towards the door, caught sight of Frances.

"Why, it's Miss Ivory," he said, giving the name an unction which was both arch and insulting. "That's cheered up my afternoon. Mind you, wait. I'll be down in a minute." He flashed a meaning smile at her and bounced out, leaving them all uncomfortable.

"Hello, Frances." Robert forced an unconvincing smile. "You've met Mr Field, haven't you?"

"I should hope so." The painter sprang up. "She was my first client. I painted her when she was fourteen. The fee Meyrick paid me got me into the U. S. Hence my career. Hallo, Frances love, I'm very depressed. Someone's been sticking knives into my beautiful señorita. What are you doing now? Come out and have a sherry. Or is it out of hours? Well, never mind, let's go and eat ice cream."

He was talking to relieve her from any embarrassment which Lucar's reception might have afforded her and she was grateful.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"There's nothing I'd like better," she said honestly.

Robert cleared his throat. "I didn't think you'd be going out, Frances," he said. Frances caught the message in his eyes and was indignant. He was actually ordering her to stay because Lucar had expressed a wish to see her.

"Oh, but I am," she said firmly. "I don't get a sound offer of ice cream every day. Shall we go now?"

She held out her hand to Field impulsively, and he took it at once and tucked her arm through his. He swept her out of the room, and they left Robert standing behind the desk, his shaking hands resting on the blotting paper.

Looking back on that scene in the long, terrifying days to follow, Frances Ivory was to wonder how much might have been altered, how much disaster averted, had they stayed beside him.

CHAPTER THREE

THEY WENT to the Café Royal, which was practically deserted at that hour of the day, and as Frances played with the sundae she did not want she considered Field afresh. At fourteen she had decided that he filled the somewhat exacting requirements of her ideal man. He had been younger then than she had supposed, and now it occurred to her that the seven years between twenty-five and thirty-two had not altered him particularly. He still had the fine head with the sensitive, almost ascetic features, which were contradicted by his expression, which was both lazy and sophisticated.

"What's going on at your place?" He put the question casually.

"Why? Did you notice anything?" She realised that the question was absurd as soon as she had put it and he laughed.

"I did, as a matter of fact," he said. "Either Phillida's husband or that painful little excrescence with the ginger hair stuck a penknife into one of my best paintings. You may feel it's negligible, but it's not the sort of treatment your poor papa would give a canvas he was commissioned to sell. I may be wrong, too, but I thought you were in a spot of trouble yourself. My dear child, you positively clung to me. It was most touching. Don't apologise. I liked it. My youth came rushing back with all the vine leaves and tendrils of romance. However, don't bother. Don't open up the family bone cupboard if you don't want to. But if you do here am I with nothing on hand, safe, sound and respectable, also eager to sympathise. What's up? The ginger twip has something on Robert, has he?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Blackmail, you mean?" Now that the word was out it did not seem quite so terrible.

"Well, I don't know." He was being cautiously casual. "I don't suppose Robert did the knifing himself, and when one chap covers up another with such desperate determination the evil thought has a way of cropping up in one's mind. It's horribly bad for business, though, that sort of thing. I'm quite remarkably easygoing, even for a painter, and I'm sitting here seething. Do you realise that?"

Frances looked at him sharply. His tone had changed slightly and she caught him unawares. Behind his smile his round dark eyes were sincerely furious. He caught short her stream of apology.

"I don't want that, my dear," he said. "It's nothing to do with you or your old man either. Those two lads evidently have something on and I rather wondered what it was. That was all. Had any other trouble?"

She described the little incident of the broken Kang-Tse vase in the antique room, mentioned the infuriating affair of the special catalogue prepared for royalty only to be discovered, a heap of charred remains, ten minutes before the august personage was due to arrive, and sketched in the circumstances which had led to the resignation of the invaluable old Peterson who had been with the firm for thirty years.

It was a curious history. The series of suspicious incidents, each one a little more serious than the last, made up a considerable sum of disaster, and the underlying fear in the young voice was appealing. He listened to her attentively.

"It's not good, old girl," he said at last. "In fact it's damned disturbing. What are you going to do? It's difficult to get Meyrick back at once, I take it? You're all pretty sure that Ginger is the man?"

"Oh yes, I think so." Frances spoke soberly and afterwards she shivered a little as an unbidden thought crept into her mind. He noticed the gesture immediately. He was amazingly sensitive to her least reaction, she realised, and put it down to his vast and notorious experience.

"Who is he?" he enquired. "Where did he come from?"

She began to explain, and a light of comprehension passed over his face.

"Dolly Godolphin's Tibetan expedition? The secret climb through the Himalayan pass?" he said. "I read about that at the time. Robert and Lucar were the only two to return, were they? Oh well, that accounts for a lot. Ginger probably saved Robert's life or something. That show was a sporting effort all round. All kinds of people might have thought up a project like that, but no one but Godolphin could possibly have persuaded a tough old nut like Meyrick to finance him. Robert went as 'Art Adviser,' if I remember? I can't exactly see

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Robert on an adventure like that, though. It's odd, isn't it? It always is the rabbit who returns while the lion is left to bleach in the sun. Godolphin was an extraordinary chap. He would have revelled in your present situation, by the way. You knew him, of course?"

She nodded. "I saw quite a lot of him in the school holidays during my last year. He and Phillida ran round together quite a bit."

"So they did." His eyes were wide and amused. "Your half sister believed in numbers."

Frances looked at him briefly. It had been true, then. Phillida had always added Field to her list of conquests but there was never any guarantee with Phillida's reminiscences. Field, then, and Godolphin and half a dozen others; they had all been in love with Phillida, who had forgotten them for a string of imaginary ailments and who had married in the end Robert, of all people. It seemed to Frances that the older she grew the more extraordinary life became.

"Robert stuck," she said slowly, continuing her thought aloud. "The others drifted away and Godolphin got lost in Tibet, but Robert stuck. He's got a sort of character under all that nerviness, you know. There's a sort of determination about him which is almost terrifying. That's why I'm so stupidly afraid, I suppose."

David picked her up. "That's a strong word," he said. "Why afraid? I didn't know people of your age were ever anything so undignified."

"Robert wants me to marry Lucar," she said frankly, "and although I know it's absurd he has such an uncanny way of getting what he wants that I sometimes feel that I might go mad and do it."

He caught her expression and his eyebrows rose.

"That's damned insulting. Robert's nuts, of course."

"He's such a little tick," she said and he nodded.

"He makes himself a bit of a nuisance, I suppose? That type can. They're unsnubbable. You don't like to go off to the South, of course, because of the trouble, I suppose? Yes, well, that's not good, Frances, my love. You're in a mess."

She smiled at him wryly. It was very comforting and pleasant to be in his company.

"You'd better get engaged," he said. "That'll scotch all that nonsense until Meyrick returns. Betrothal is old fashioned, I know, but it has its virtues, like flannel. Any likely lad about?"

She laughed. "No one I could ask," she said.

He did not seem to be particularly amused. "It ought to be someone you know or it might lead to marriage," he said seriously. "When's your father due home?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"January or February."

"A long time. Phillida's just her own sweet self, I take it?"

"Just about."

"Oh. Well, suppose I take you out now and buy you a ring? Not a violently expensive one, but decent enough to show the relations. Any good?"

He had lost a great deal of his lightheartedness, and it flashed through her mind that he was embarrassed. She was astounded. David Field had one of those curious reputations which are based on no concrete fact; that is to say, although he was reputed to be a lion among women there were no actual names with which his own was linked. There had been no marriages, no divorces, no engagements. No one remembered any actual affair of any duration.

He was watching her face and she reddened guiltily.

"I'm not asking you to marry me and I don't suppose we ever should," he said with an abruptness which was unlike him. "I mean even if we became hysterical about each other — and that sort of thing does happen, you'd be surprised — there's the question of money. I'm very sensitive about money. You've got an indecent amount of cash. That rather rules out marriage, you see. I was once accused of being a fortune hunter and I damned nearly killed the old woman who suggested it. I had an Indian club in my hand at the time — honestly, this is no laughing matter — and I raised it. I didn't hit her, thank God, but I was going to. I felt it. I've never been more frightened in my life. My hat, that was a near thing!"

He sat back and it dawned on her that he was not entirely joking. His smile had vanished, and for an instant she saw determination in his eyes and a half-frightened, half-passionate honesty.

"So marriage is off," he resumed cheerfully. "However, I don't go back to New York until April, and meanwhile if you'd care for an engagement ring let's go out and buy one."

Frances remained silent. She was not even sure if he was serious. On the face of it the proposition was a wild one but it was attractive. Meanwhile he continued to regard her quizzically, and she wondered if he was laughing at her. As it happened, he was merely considering her with the dispassionate curiosity of the professsional painter. He saw that the fine bones which he had painted five years before were now more apparent and that the slightly upward line of the long narrow eyes, which had so delighted him when he first discovered it, had become accentuated. She was lovely, nor was it, he thought, the *beauté du diable*. When Frances Ivory was as old as Gabrielle she would still have strength and breeding in her shapely head, character and sensitiveness in her wide mouth.

"Well?" he said.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It would settle one of my difficulties until Meyrick comes home, but it seems a frightful imposition." She made the announcement dubiously and was then unreasonably dashed because he did not protest.

"Anything to oblige an old client," he said lightly. "That's a bet, then. We'll buy the ring, write the newspapers and go and tell the family. That'll be one embarrassment settled. When the time comes you can throw me over for another or we can quarrel about the ballet, which is a nice refined thing to do. Meanwhile stick to the story. That's the main thing."

She hung back awkwardly.

"You won't be upsetting anybody?" she enquired at last. "Any other woman, I mean."

"I? Oh, lord, no, I'm free, unattached and unbeloved." He laughed at her expression. "I'm doing you a signal honour in entrusting you with my precious liberty. I hope you realise that! I've never even been engaged before. None of the objects of my adoration has ever got her hooks in me."

"Why? Was it always money?"

He frowned. "Eh?" he said. "Oh yes, money. That and other things. Come on, you'll have to have an aquamarine with those eyes."

They were laughing again as they stepped into the street, and the fitful wind plucked at their sleeves and threw warm, soft rain in their eyes, tormenting them, beseeching their attention. Afterwards they both remembered it. As they went over each incident in that fateful day the motif of the squalling wind kept recurring like the thin blast of a warning trumpet, but they were deaf to it and went on their predestined way unaware.

CHAPTER FOUR

"WHERE ARE THEY NOW? in the garden room? Oh, Frances, how could you do this? How could you?"

Phillida Madrigal lay among the cushions on her day bed and wept.

"It's the strain, the intolerable strain," she whispered. "Wasn't it enough for me to be annihilated by the impossible scene with Gabrielle without you rushing in and starting another with Robert and David Field?"

Frances stood on the hearthrug of the white-panelled bedroom.

"I had no idea that Granny had come here, let alone that she was still in the house," she said, twisting the new ring round her finger. "It never occurred to me that she might actually drive out and tackle Robert. She's so terrifyingly old. I didn't think she understood a word I said this afternoon."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh, she understood." Phillida Madrigal forgot her tears in her anger. "She's as strong as a horse and as obstinate as a mule. I wish to God I had her strength. When she came in on old Dorothea's arm she positively dominated the entire house. Robert was mad to be rude to her. She listened to him, she let him rage, she let him say the most unforgivable things, and then she simply sat down and sent Dorothea out to prepare Meyrick's bedroom for her. Naturally Robert protested — I did myself. She said it had been her room for thirty years and she was going to bed in it. What could one do? There was nothing to say. Finally Dorothea took her up. Gabrielle ignored Robert. She simply looked through him. But she had heard what he said. She's dangerous, Frances. A hard, selfish, proud old woman. And she's in the house. It's your fault. You may have killed her. You may have started up anything. Oh, don't you think you ought to go down?"

She was sitting up now, and the faint light was kind to her, taking out the petulant lines round her mouth and deepening the shadows round her eyes, burnishing the copper lights in her smooth hair.

"How can I?" The younger girl spoke wearily. "Robert said he wanted to talk to David alone. He could hardly have made himself more clear."

Phillida got up and walked down the room, her lace negligee trailing.

"Frances," she said suddenly, "have you ever thought that Robert might be mad?"

The question would have been remarkable if only because it came from Phillida and concerned the state of mind of somebody other than herself, but up in the dark bedroom, with the firelight flickering and the wind chattering round the house, its very directness shot a chill to Frances' diaphragm.

"Why? Why do you say that?"

"Oh, nothing. I'm nervy. I hate this insufferable house. I've only been married to him two years, Frances. He's always been queer and difficult, but just lately he's much, much worse. He watches me, he watches you. He's made up his mind that you shall marry Lucar."

"Then I'm afraid he's doomed to disappointment, my dear."

Phillida did not answer for some minutes, and when at last she spoke her remark was unexpected.

"Did you know that David Field had a dreadful row with Gabrielle once over me? It was years ago, of course, long before he became known." She laughed abruptly and threw up her arms in a sudden gesture. "Oh, why did I marry Robert?" she said. "I was secretly engaged to Dolly Godolphin when they went out on that ghastly expedition, and then when poor Dolly was lost and I was brokenhearted Robert just happened to be there. I was mad. Oh, Frances, be careful who you marry."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She went back to the day bed and, throwing herself down upon it, began to cry. Frances was staring into the fire. So it had been Gabrielle who had called him a fortune hunter and raised the devil in him.

Phillida's muffled voice cut into her thoughts with a startling suggestion.

"For God's sake go down to them. What can they possibly be *doing* all this time? They've both got insane tempers. Go down and see."

Frances looked up sharply. "Perhaps I'd better," she said and found that her breath was uneven.

Just outside the door she ran into Dorothea, Gabrielle's elderly maid. The plump old woman was pale with unaccustomed excitement and she laid a hand on the girl's arm.

"I can't do a thing with her," she said. "She won't go to bed and she won't take any drops. He didn't ought to have said those things to her, Mr. Robert didn't. She wouldn't have stood it from one of her own and she certainly won't from him. She's angry, that's what she is. I've only seen her like it twice before in my life, once when Mr. Meyrick's first wife, Miss Phillida's mother, ran off and left him, and once when she had some words with a young gentleman who came to the house. She's angry and she's old. She's brooding. I wondered should I send for a doctor."

"I don't see what he could do, do you?" said Frances. "I'm afraid all this is my fault, Dorothea. I'm so sorry."

The old woman regarded her with the stern common sense of her kind.

"Well, it hasn't done a lot of good, has it, miss?" she said. "I'll go down in a minute and get her a mite of hot milk. She may take that and go to sleep. He *has* upset her. They make me wild, these nervy men. There's something very wrong in this house. I notice it if you don't. Something very wrong."

She went off down the corridor. Frances went on downstairs. The house was quiet and almost dark.

The garden room was at the end of the passage off the main hall. There were two doors side by side, one leading to the room and the other giving out onto an iron staircase running down to the flagged yard, which was all that encroaching London had left of an eighteenth-century rosary.

At the mouth of the corridor she hesitated. A man was hurrying down it towards her. To her astonishment she recognised Lucar. She was so surprised to find him in the house at that time of night that she did not move, and he came up to her. He was shaking with fury and his red face was patched with white where taut muscles had banished the blood. Also he was smiling. He paused in front of her. She attempted to pass him with a conventional murmur. He shot out a hand, however, and, catching her arm, swung her round. She was not prepared for his strength. He lifted her hand and looked for the ring on it.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When he saw it he flung her away from him and strode off down the hall into the shadows of the porch, leaving her angry and breathless.

She went on down the corridor, her courage up but her knees shaking. Outside the door of the garden room she paused. There was an ominous silence within, and her outstretched hand drew away from the latch. Disliking herself for the subterfuge, she turned to the other door and let herself out onto the iron steps. The yard was a well of darkness.

She went softly down the staircase and took a step or two across the flags. Around her were dim forms in the faint light from the sky where scudding clouds raced across the moon. There was a packing case containing one of Meyrick's Chinese purchases standing like a gun emplacement behind her, and beyond, in the angle of the wall, was a little shed where some of the wood for the gallery's casemaking was kept. Frances looked up at the great bulwark of the house. The curtains of the garden room had not been drawn and she saw David distinctly. He was standing behind the table, leaning on it and looking down. The scene had the brilliant unreality of a stage-set. He was not talking but might have been listening or merely looking, and his expression was curiously blank.

It was that blankness which first terrified her; it was so unlike him. His lazy smile might never have existed, and his eyes were hard and apparently unseeing.

The moment seemed to drag out intolerably and then, just when she was on the point of screwing up her courage to break in on them, came the sound.

It was a little stir, a little shuffling which was not quite the wind, and it was behind her. She swung round, her heart rising. The shaft from the window made a narrow angle of light which ran right across the door of the shed, cutting it in two and passing directly through the latch. As she turned she could have sworn that the handle moved and the door cracked inwards.

Panic, unreasoning and uncontrollable, descended upon her. She ran. She fled up the iron staircase, through the corridor, across the hall, mounted the main stairs and rushed over the upper landing into her own room.

She was still there, crouching on the dressing-table stool, trying to pull herself together and to force the terror which had seized her out of her mind, when David knocked and put his head in.

"I took a chance on finding the right door," he said, coming over to her. "Well, my dear, we're still engaged."

The words were meant to be reassuring, but he was speaking with an uncharacteristic jerkiness, and she stared at him in panic.

"What's the matter? What's happened?"

"Nothing." The denial came a little too quickly and he laughed to cover it. "I just thought I'd see you before I went, to tell you it's all okay in spite of our

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Robert's unendearing manners. He's going off for a walk, by the way. It's not a bad idea. The night air may cool him down a bit."

"What did he say?"

"Just about what you'd think," he said. "Forget him. We're engaged. Good night."

She thought he was going to kiss her, but he merely touched her hand abruptly and went out, closing the door behind him.

She stood where she was for some time and then, on an impulse, followed him out into the upper hall. It was quite dark and silent, and she crept forward to lean over the balustrade. The hall below was an inky pit, and the sound of the front door closing startled her. She waited but there was still no light and no sound of a returning servant, so she took it that David had let himself out.

And then, while she stood there, something happened. Someone walked sharply down the corridor from the garden room, crossed the hall with a brisk, light step, and strode out of the house, closing the front door firmly behind him. She saw no one. There was not a shadow in the dusk. The sounds were so sharp and decisive that they should have struck a reassuring note in that world of creaks and whispers, yet to the girl clinging to the slender balustrade they were so horrifying that she almost screamed, and as she crept back to the light of her own room they sank into her mind with a vividness which she was afterwards to regard as prophetic.

"It's only Robert going out for his walk," she said aloud to herself in the mirror. "Only Robert going out, you fool."

Yet on the following morning when Norris, Meyrick's butler, announced with casual urbanity that Mr Robert had not been in the house all night but that his hat and coat were missing, and enquired a trifle slyly if his letters had not best be sent down to his club, no one was particularly alarmed.

Relief came first: relief for Frances, relief for Phillida, relief for Gabrielle holding court in her great tapestry-hung bed.

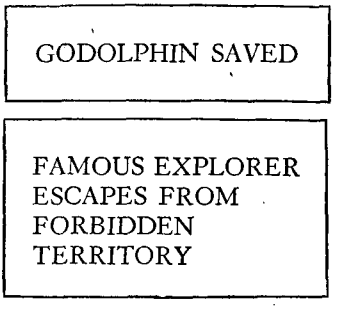
Fear came later. It began on the third day when it was discovered that Robert was not sulking in Jermyn Street, and fear deepened and grew into dull terror when discreet enquiries at Blue Bridges, the Surrey country house, brought no news of him, and when the valet at the Paris flat wired back to say that Monsieur was not there.

Fear came with the letters to Frances, pouring in after the announcement of the engagement. Fear came with the discreet enquiries from Robert's few friends. Fear came with a hundred and one little demands for Robert's decision in business matters.

Fear came from Lucar's sullenness, from Phillida's hysterics and from the odd, preoccupied expression in David's eyes.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And then one morning seven days after Robert's disappearance two things happened. One was the news wired from the wilds of the Northwest province of India and flashed into every newspaper office in the world. The curt message appeared on the evening-paper boards. Phillida read them from her bedroom window as they stood propped up against the railings of the square.



She was standing there staring at the display when the second event occurred which forced the first into obscurity, focussed the attention of the entire city on Sallet Square, and brought Meyrick racing back from China as fast as train and plane could carry him.

Frances came into her half sister's room without ceremony. She was trying to keep very quiet, very calm, and her grey eyes were dark with the effort of control.

"Phillida," she said huskily, "something's happened. You've got to pull yourself together, darling. You've got to be incredibly brave and — and —— Oh, for God's sake, keep your head."

The woman swung round. "They've found Robert?"

Frances regarded her steadily.

"Yes," she said. "Did you know?"

"I? No, of course not. I don't know anything. Where is he? What's he done?"

"Oh, darling." The young voice quivered and broke. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean that. I don't know what I thought. He — he's been down in the garden room all the time. His coat and hat were there too, lying on top of him. That cupboard's never opened, you know. There's nothing in it in the ordinary way. They've just found him. Norris called me."

The words were tumbling out of her mouth in a helpless stream, and she struggled to restrain them.

Phillida came quietly across the room towards her. She laid her hand on her half sister's shoulder and shook her.

"Frances, are you telling me that Robert is dead?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The girl met her eyes and her own were panic-stricken. She nodded.

Phillida's hand dropped. Her face was calm and her tone rather horribly matter of fact.

"Thank God," she said simply.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I SHOULDN'T COME if I were you, madam."

The unnatural sharpness in the butler's voice gave the words a macabre quality of their own. Frances felt Phillida waver in the crook of her arm as the two women paused abruptly in the passage outside the garden room while the man barred their path in the sharp angle of the half-closed door.

Phillida shook her head. It was a vigorous, meaningless movement, and in that nightmare moment the gesture appeared to have a dreadful studied idiocy.

"No," said Phillida. "No. Get out of the way, Norris."

The blaze of light in the garden room in the morning always came as a surprise as one turned to it out of the cool greyness of the hall, but today its radiance was pitiless. The sunlight poured into the room through the wide-open window with the energy of a living thing. Nor did it respect the deep recess behind the open door in the white panelling but hurled itself within and pounced with indecent savagery upon the dreadful thing, the thing with the mercilessly exposed head and the strange, dusty-looking hair.

Robert Madrigal had died and stiffened and grown limp again. He sat squarely in the bottom of the cupboard, his back supported by the wall and his legs doubled up before him. Across his knees lay a raincoat, a pair of yellow gloves and, final touch of ghastly incongruity, an upturned bowler hat.

Frances took Phillida's full weight as she heeled over, and Norris caught them both as they reeled against the table.

"I said not to go in. I said not to go in," he repeated infuriatingly to Frances as between them they got the other woman out into the passage. "I've phoned the police and the doctor. You take her, miss. I can't leave *him*, can I?"

Neither of them saw anything absurd in the final statement, although Robert Madrigal had been left alone for many days and would be left alone for an eternity.

Old Dorothea came waddling down the corridor from the hall where the rest of the staff lingered in whispering conclave and put capable nurse's hands on Phillida's elbows.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Come along, my dear. Come along, my pretty. Come along, my brave girl," she said, slurring all the words together until they had no meaning but made a single comforting sound. "And you, too, Miss Frances," she added over her shoulder with calculated tartness. "I don't know what you think you're doing, taking her in there, and her so delicate as it is. Come along, my dear."

She had the dynamic energy of the sunlight itself, and her stalwart body moved with the magnificent drive and precision of a little draught horse surmounting a hill. Frances plodded on beside her, supporting Phillida's other arm.

The Italian bed in Meyrick's room was an impressive erection. The baroque gilt framework rose to the ceiling and the two movable wings hung out on either side like banners. The bright tapestry of the triptych had not faded and Matthew, Mark, Luke and John blessed the couch which Gabrielle lay on in vivid blue and gold and red.

She sat up in it, wrapped in Shetland lace, remote and inapproachable, a little yellow scrap of dying authority. Dorothea led the procession into the room without ceremony. She lowered Phillida into a chair by the open fire and began to slap her hands with rhythmic determination.

The old Gabrielle's bright black eyes rested on the two of them for a moment and the expression on her pursed mouth was almost contemptuous. Finally she beckoned Frances over with a finger raised among the woolly lace.

"Are the police here yet?" The old voice was brisk in spite of the lowered tone.

"No, darling."

"Does the servant know how the man died?"

"No, I don't think so. I don't know."

"Go and find out and come and tell me. Hurry, child, hurry."

It was extraordinary, as if disaster had fanned a flickering fire into life again. So here was Gabrielle, a force once more albeit a fleeting and uncertain one. Frances went out.

At the head of the staircase she paused. The hall was crowded. The Georgian elegance of 38 Sallet Square was in the hands of the police.

Norris was there, very much in evidence. He was whispering to a uniformed police inspector and another man, a tall, gloomy-looking stranger in a spruce tweed suit whose grizzled head was held sideways in a curious terrierlike attitude which she was to come to know very well indeed. Directly beneath her a maid hovered nervously, and behind the girl she saw the door to the service corridor was ajar and the housekeeper listening behind it.

As she stood looking down there was a clatter on the flags as the police photographers arrived. Their strident, decisive tramp touched a memory in her mind, and her fingers gripped the polished wood.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Not so long ago she had hung over this same balustrade and had peered down into the grey darkness, and on that occasion, too, there had been sharp footsteps marching swiftly across the hall. Then it had been a sound which should have been reassuring, and her own mental admonition returned to her: "It's only Robert going out, you fool. It's only Robert going out." Robert going out? Robert going *out!* In view of the morning's discovery the suggestion was ghastly. Robert had not gone out that night. At that moment a week ago when she had hung here listening Robert must already have been sitting in the bottom of the big cupboard, his head lolling and his legs twisted horribly beneath him.

Someone else had gone out. Someone else had walked into the windy darkness. Someone else. . . . Who?

There was another movement in the hall below as a new arrival came slowly forward from the porch. The entire company turned towards him, and Frances felt the skin at the back of her neck tighten as she recognised him.

She never forgot David as she saw him at that moment. It was not that she had never known before that she was in love with him, nor did it seem then or afterwards that his appearance had any deep emotional significance. It was simply that he sprang to her mind, a vivid and complete picture which never quite faded again.

He came quietly into the room, casual and friendly as usual. He glanced round him with the faintly surprised expression which was half his charm and suddenly glanced up, as if he knew where to find her, and raised his hand in friendly salute.

Everyone stared at her, and she came down hurriedly, aware that she was white and frightened and completely demoralised by the appalling idea which had just come to her. Norris said something to the man with the grizzled hair who came forward to meet her. She had no idea who he was, and even had he introduced himself it is not likely that his name or his exalted rank of divisional detective inspector would have made much impression on her at that moment, but she could not fail to recognise authority in his face nor to see in those small steady eyes that rigorous honesty which is, perhaps because of its corresponding cruelty, the most terrifying quality in the world.

"If you'll chust wait upstairs for a little, Miss Ivory, I'll send for ye in a moment or two," he said, revealing the soft voice and absence of *j*s of the Orkney Scot. The question which had been on her lips died before it was spoken. She nodded and glanced at David Field, but the newcomer was before her.

"You'll be Mr Field, won't ye?" he was saying. "One moment, Mr Field. I'd like a word with ye."

Frances saw the younger man's eyebrows go up and caught his faint smile

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

before he turned and grimaced at her. It was the most reassuring of gestures, revealing a comforting understanding of her mood. She warmed before it gratefully, but as she turned away the new and horrible suspicion came back to her.

"I heard him go out *before* that," she said vehemently to Gabrielle a few moments later as she stood at the end of the bed once more. "It's quite clear in my mind. David went out first that night. I heard the latch click just after I reached the stairhead. Then about ten minutes later than that someone walked sharply down the passage from the garden room and went out of the front door."

"Yes," said the old Gabrielle placidly. "How deceptive a noise like that is in the night."

They were alone in the enormous bedroom, the two of them, the youngest and the oldest of the Ivorys, and they stood looking at one another, summing each other up for a long time. Years afterwards it occurred to Frances that she grew up at that moment.

She stepped back from the bed and walked over to the fireplace. The old woman watched her, an expression that was purely feminine in her eyes.

"I had a nineteen-inch waist when I was twenty-five," she said suddenly, and for the first time in their acquaintance her granddaughter followed her line of thought easily and replied to it without looking round.

"It's my life anyway," she said. "I know what I'm doing. You're wrong about David having designs on my money. He doesn't even want to marry me. The engagement was only a silly stunt to make things easier. I went and bellowed my troubles to him about Lucar. I told you."

Gabrielle glanced at the slim young back. It was a swift stab with the little black eyes, and her husband, Meyrick's father, who had loved her and had needed every one of his shrewd wits to keep up with her, would have recognised the symptom and congratulated his granddaughter.

"You heard the latch click and then afterwards, some time afterwards, you heard someone else cross the hall and go out?"

The question was clear and lucid, with a brain behind it. For the time being Gabrielle had returned from the shadows and inexactitudes of age and her voice was as decisive as ever it had been.

"Yes, I told you. And, Granny, Lucar was in the house that night. I know that because I saw him. I met him when I went down to the garden room."

"When *you* went down to the garden room?"

The interruption was very quiet but it brought the girl swinging round, colour surging over her face. She told her story hurriedly.

"I went down to see how David and Robert were getting on together. I met Lucar coming away from the garden room as I went through the hall but

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I didn't speak to him. I went on down the passage, but the door was shut and I didn't like to go barging in so I — I went down into the yard."

"And looked up through the window?" said the old woman unexpectedly. She was sitting up, with her eyes alive as a monkey's. "Very sensible. Just what I should have done myself. What did you see?"

Frances regarded her steadily. "Oh, they were just talking, you know," she said deliberately.

"You saw them both?"

"Yes, I did."

"Are you in love?"

"No, I don't think so. I don't know."

Gabrielle lay back. Her face was peaceful and she was half smiling. Frances was half afraid that the excitement had proved too much for her for she was silent for a long time, but when she spoke again it was evident that she was still thinking.

"They say it's unlucky to marry for love," she remarked. "Very true. Did you see Field again that night?"

"Yes. He came up to my room to say that we were still engaged and that Robert was going for a walk."

"To your bedroom? Quite like a servant girl," she said.

Frances regarded her sombrely and finally shrugged her own shoulders. It was a little skirmish across a century.

"We must cable Meyrick." Frances spoke mainly to herself. "That's the first thing to be done."

"We must see the police," snapped Mrs Ivory. "We must find out what they know about it. That's the vital thing. If they want to come up here I'll see them, but you remind them I'm a very old woman."

The final instruction seemed to amuse her and Frances, glancing at her, wondered how much she comprehended of the horror, of the sick feeling of catastrophe, as she peered down upon the scene through the long telescope of her great age.

"What happened to Phillida?" she enquired.

Gabrielle regarded her blankly and once again the girl felt the ground unsteady beneath her feet as she recognised the uncertainty of that fine but fading mind.

"I left her here with Dorothea, darling," she said gently. "Don't you remember?"

As she waited for the reply a clatter of voices beneath the window rose up into the room, and the nightmare quality of her own position swept over her. Gabrielle was a terrifying ally.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Did you? Perhaps you did. I must have got rid of her. I told Dorothea to send for a doctor. These piteous women without stamina! Fetch me my hand mirror, will you, dear? What's going on out there?"

The final demand was vigorous enough, and Frances threw up the window sash. She looked down at the narrow path which ran round from the front of the house to the yard at the back under an archway between 38 and the gallery. The window was directly above the service exit, and it was here that the noise originated. Mrs Sanderson, the housekeeper, was standing on the flags. In her arms lay a weeping figure in whose neat blue-suited elegance Frances had some difficulty in recognising Molly, the junior member of the household staff. Molly was crying noisily with her fashionable hat on the back of her head, her face buried in Mrs Sanderson's bosom. Standing before this inelegant and inexplicable group was a solid young man in the boots of a plain-clothes policeman. He held a suitcase in each hand and was using them to shoo the women back into the house.

"Do it inside," he was saying with the weary cheerfulness of the native Londoner. "Have your cry by the kitchen fire, like Christians. Go along, there's good girls. Take her in, Ma. Take her in, do."

"No. It's not right for her to stay. Not another minute. She's doing the right thing. If you're a policeman you show me your warrant."

"Dear heaven!" said Gabrielle from the bed.

The comment implied reproach rather than astonishment, and Frances leaned out hastily.

"Anything I can do?" she demanded.

The voice from the clouds had the instantaneous effect of all such interruptions. Mrs Sanderson shut her mouth with ominous resolution and Molly's bellowing ceased abruptly. The plain-clothes man put down his suitcases and pulled off his hat.

"Orders are no one is to leave the house, miss," he said politely.

"Oh. Oh, I see. All right. Go in, Mrs Sanderson, will you? And you too, Molly. I don't suppose they'll be long, or you can have your day out tomorrow."

A pink and blubbery face was raised to her from the shelter of Mrs Sanderson's cushionly façade.

"I wasn't going out, miss. I was leaving."

"Really?" Francis was astounded. All Meyrick's servants were very real personalities in his household, and their comings and goings were of general interest to the entire family, so this casual method of departure was an innovation.

"Oh, I see. Well, leave tomorrow," she said awkwardly. "Anyway, go in now. I'll come down."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I wish you would, miss." There was a world of unspoken promise in the housekeeper's voice.

Frances shut the window and turned back to the dressing table to take up the mirror. She did not see Gabrielle until she leaned across the bed to pass the hand glass to her, and then the sudden change in the old woman's appearance came as a shock. Mrs Ivory was sitting bolt upright, her face shrunk into a yellow doll's mask. Her eyes were alive. They were bright, like a mouse's eyes, and quite as suspicious.

"What did she say?"

"Nothing. It's only that Molly, the little middle maid, appears to be leaving, and a policeman has just turned her back . . . My dear! Granny! Are you all right? Hadn't you better lie down?"

Gabrielle closed her eyes. Without their comforting intelligence she made a terrifying picture. The old woman suffered herself to be settled among her cushions.

"It's all very tiring," she said at last with a peevishness which was yet reassuring because of its strength. "Where's Dorothea?"

"I'll get her."

"No. No, don't." A small hand closed over her wrist with surprising force. "Don't. Stay here." It occurred to Frances that the grip was a restraining one rather than any actual need for support.

"I ought to go down," she said gently. "I'll find Dorothea for you."

"No." Gabrielle still had her eyes closed. "Frances, have you ever thought that stepsister of yours was . . . a little *funny*?"

It was impossible to mistake her meaning, and the enquiry put so directly and echoing Phillida's own question about Robert caught Frances off her guard.

"No," she said. "No, darling, of course not."

"You jumped, my dear." The black eyes were open again and watching her. "Does she talk to you?"

"No, not very much. She's all right. This has been a terrible shock to her, of course."

"Naturally." She remarked after a long pause, "That mania of Phillida's for doctors, that's unhealthy. She never told you she heard anything, then?"

"Heard anything?" Even from her mouth the words had a sinister sound, and she glanced at the small figure in the bed with misgiving. "When, darling? On the night Robert was . . . on the night Robert must have died?"

"Oh no, before. Long before."

"Darling, what are you talking about?"

"Forget it, my dear," Gabrielle said placidly. "I'm so old I imagine things.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Listen, there's someone coming across the landing."

Frances turned her head. The house seemed silent for once that morning, holding its breath perhaps.

"I don't think so."

"Yes, there is. My dear child, I haven't slept in this room for thirty years of my life without getting to know it. Open the door."

Frances crossed the room. The heavy quilted door slid open noiselessly under her hand and Miss Dorset, who had been hesitating on the threshold, jumped guiltily.

"I didn't like to knock in case she was asleep," she whispered, dragging the startled girl out into the hallway. "I've cabled our branch office at Hong Kong. They'll reach your father, wherever he is. How did it happen? Do you know?"

Everything was painfully vivid that day, and Frances saw a complete picture of the woman vignetted in the archway of the landing. The unusual excitement had tinged her cheekbones, and there was a forced heartiness about her which undermined her efficiency and made her seem a less reliable person.

"I'm keeping it from the staff at 39 as long as I can," she hurried on. "There'll be reporters, you know. What would you like done with them?"

Even at that time, when the publicity side of the disaster was a menace unsuspected by most of them, the question struck Frances as absurd.

"What does one do with reporters?" she said.

"I can try to send them away," said Miss Dorset defensively, "but sometimes it's as well to issue some sort of statement. There's no one at the gallery who can decide anything. I suppose I'm in command. I can't even get hold of Lucar. He hasn't turned up yet."

"It's late, isn't it?" Frances was vague. Time had become an unconsidered element and years to have passed during the morning.

"Nearly half-past twelve. I phoned his house but he left there at nine. I don't know where he is." Miss Dorset's voice was querulous. "I'm coming to the end of my tether, Miss Ivory. I can carry on as long as I've got somebody in authority over me but I'm not used to being alone and . . ."

She paused and the suspicious brightness in her pale eyes brought Frances to her senses.

"Of course you're not, Miss Dorset," she said. "It's all very dreadful and sudden, but don't worry. We'll get by. You go back and carry on as usual. If you get enquiries about Robert pass them on to me and I'll deal with them. Get hold of Lucar as soon as you can, of course. The police will want to see him."

She paused. The other woman was looking at her eagerly, half fear and half excitement in her expression.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Then it *was*, was it? I heard something, but I didn't like to ask any more. Who?"

"We don't know. They're finding out now." It was a ridiculous conversation. Evasion of the actual word was instinctive in them both. Miss Dorset's hand shook in the pocket of her coat and her mouth trembled.

"It's dreadful," she said. "In over a hundred years we've never had a breath of scandal and now it's come when your father is away. Are you sure Mr Robert couldn't have done it himself?"

"Well, no. You see, he was found in the cupboard. He must have been hidden there by someone."

Miss Dorset nodded and was silent for a while.

"It's extraordinary," she said at last. "I've often wondered how I should behave if ever I was confronted by a . . . a dreadful crime like this, but now that I am it's just like any other terrible thing, isn't it? Miss Ivory, Mr Lucar was over here that night. Did you know?"

"Yes, I saw him."

"Oh." The pale eyes rested on the girl for a moment, but she did not pursue the train of thought. Instead she sniffed and said abruptly: "If it had been the other way round I could understand it. Or if he'd done it himself."

"Could you? Robert was nervy but not suicidal."

"Don't you think so?"

They were still speaking in whispers, and the elder woman's question was sibilant in its sharpness. Frances gaped at her.

"What do you mean? What makes you say that?"

Miss Dorset hesitated, but when her words did come they were so extraordinary that for the second time that day Frances received the sharp little stab in her diaphragm which comes from a fear which is not to be explained, the secret superstitious terror of the utterly unreasonable.

"Did he never talk to you about the whistle on the telephone?" said Miss Dorset. "He didn't?" she added hastily as she saw the girl's expression. "Oh well, then, don't mention it, for heaven's sake. I ought not to have said anything. I'll go back. I daren't leave the gallery any longer. Any time I'm needed just send over. I shall be there."

Frances caught the angular shoulder just as she was turning away.

"You sound as if you thought Robert was insane."

Miss Dorset eyed her. "I did wonder," she said.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CHAPTER SIX

THE YOUNGEST IVORY hesitated. Gabrielle's room was quiet and she seized the opportunity to be alone. She felt a desperate need for a pause, a minute or two in which to pull herself together.

She turned into her own room mechanically and entered its cool fastness with a feeling of relief which was shattered at once as a tall thin figure stepped back from the window and came towards her.

"Hallo, Duchess," said David Field. "I thought you must come along here sooner or later. How are the nerves?"

He stood looking down at her, a cigarette case held out invitingly, and Frances found herself thinking that he was a devastatingly good-looking person. It was only a momentary respite, however. In a moment she was back in the crisis again.

"What did they ask you?" she demanded, taking a cigarette. "Robert was murdered, was he?"

"Looks like it, ducky." She caught his expression as he held the match for her and was surprised by the impersonal quality of its concern. There was no fear there. He was thinking entirely of her. "The head nark is a nice old Scot," he went on lightly. "He talked to me like a father. I found myself yearning to confide my secret inhibitions. What's up? Why the wide-open-eye effect?"

Frances, who had not been aware of her change of expression, found the sudden demand confusing.

"There isn't one," she said hastily, and he laughed and put an arm round her shoulders.

"You think I'm a mug, don't you?" he said. "You're a most refreshing person, so trusting. I wish I were. Which reminds me, do you recollect performing a Girl Scout act of mercy on my hand with a bottle of iodine some time last week?"

Frances glanced up at him and her eyes flickered. She did remember the incident. He had called in one morning to discuss the announcement of their engagement, amusing her by his secret embarrassment. While they were talking she had noticed a loose flap of skin on his knuckle and had insisted on the antiseptic. She remembered standing in the breakfast room, smearing the stuff on while she told him of Robert's flight to his club. It must have been on the first day, then, on the morning after Robert's death.

"Yes," she said cautiously. "Why?"

He held out his right hand palm downward for her inspection.

"A complete cure," he said. "Gone without trace. Ever heard of Coriolanus?"

"Who?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Coriolanus. A hellishly noble Roman. He was touchy about displaying his wounds. I'm just like him. I thought I'd mention it. Forget the incident entirely, will you?"

His arm tightened about her and she stared at him, the full significance of the request breaking over her in a shivery wave which caught her breath and sent the blood flying out of her face. She was looking up at him, her face so near his own that she only saw his mouth. She saw it narrow and twist like a disappointed child's, and then he had released her abruptly.

"Oh, tell 'em what you like, ducky," he said, "but for God's sake don't dramatise the old man."

"I'm not. But . . ."

"But what? But what, old water-colour eyes?"

They stood looking at one another, the man defensive and ostensibly amused, and the girl hurt and in her heart most desperately afraid.

It was unfortunate that the knock should have come at that moment or that, as neither of them answered it, the door should have been thrust open by a startled policeman. There was quite a little group on the landing. Norris and a plain-clothes man were there, as well as the elderly Orkney Scot. Before that owlish and official stare Frances slowly reddened. She glanced at David out of the corner of her eye and saw him grave and slightly at a disadvantage.

" 'To the pure all things are slightly indecent,' " he quoted to her under his breath and turned to smile at the elder man. "Have you met Miss Frances Ivory, Inspector?" he enquired. "Frances, this is Mr Bridie, the divisional detective inspector."

"I'm cholly pleased to meet you, Miss Ivory," said the D.D.I. "I'd like a word with ye," he continued and added, looking round him, "We'd hardly talk in he-ere."

There was nothing impolite in his objection; it was simply a statement of his personality, and Frances, who was a stranger to the prurience of the police, felt out of her depth and unjustly ashamed. They all went out on the landing, and Norris and the two subordinate policemen withdrew discreetly to the head of the stairs. Bridie glanced at David.

"I'd like my word wi' the young lady alone," he said mildly.

David nodded and drifted off to join the others. Bridie led her into the corner of the landing.

"I don't want a statement from ye yet, Miss Ivory," he said. "This is a serious business. A bad, nasty business, an' the sooner we get to the bottom of it the better for all concer-rned. I hear your sister's ill and can't be distur-rbed, so the doctor says?" He paused enquiringly.

"My stepsister," said Frances mechanically.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Your stepsister." He corrected himself. "Ma mistake. I'm sorry." She saw him making a mental note of a lack of sympathy between herself and Phillida as clearly as if he had written it down under her eyes, and her feeling of unsafety grew. "I know who ye are an' all about ye," he went on in a gentle, avuncular fashion as if he were speaking to a child, "an' after a bit I'll ask ye one or two questions, mebbe, but chust now I wondered if perhaps ye'd tek me in to see your granny?"

"To see Gabrielle?" She glanced at the big leather-covered door across the hall. "I'll see," she said and hesitated. "Inspector Bridie, what exactly has happened? Was Robert murdered?"

He looked down at her, and his face, with its fine lines and arched eye sockets, was gently disapproving.

"That's a very unpleasant wor-rd, Miss Ivory. Your poor brother-in-law was killed. How it happened I'm attempting to deter-mine."

His ladylikeness provided the finishing touch to the nightmare quality of the situation, and she saw him then for the first time in the light in which she was to see him ever after, as the embodied spirit of that gentle but inexorable and humourless enquiry which is the finest tradition of British police detection.

"I'll see Granny," she said hastily.

Old Mrs Ivory laid down her hand mirror and settled her shawls more carefully about her when Frances brought the divisional detective inspector in some few minutes later. Dorothea stood wooden and disapproving by the head of the imposing bed and Bridie advanced cautiously. The old Gabrielle regarded him steadily. Her back was held stiffly against the pillows and her eyes were alive and imperious.

"I have lived a very long time," she said. Either as a greeting or as an opening gambit the announcement was unexpected and unanswerable and the Scot bowed.

"Ye have indeed, ma'am," he said awkwardly. "I wouldn't venture to intrude upon ye if the cir-rcumstances didn't make it ver-ry desir-rable."

The old lady listened to him with evident pleasure, for she smiled.

"What is Scotland like nowadays?" she enquired. "I used to go up to Braemar in the season, long ago."

Bridie shot an imploring glance at the girl, who went forward.

"Darling, this is the divisional detective inspector. He wants to talk to you about Robert."

"Robert," said Gabrielle, and a shadow passed over her face. "Oh yes, of course, of course, I was forgetting. I forget so much. So you're a policeman?"

The final question was put sharply and Bridie stiffened.

"I am, ma'am."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The police," said Gabrielle and sighed, "in our house. I remember. I remember. Of course. Poor Robert died yesterday."

"Yesterday?" It seemed to Frances that he pounced upon the word as if it had been an admission.

"Yes," said Gabrielle, "and they only told me this morning. You told me, Dorothea." She turned to the servant with a tiny fluttering gesture.

"It's part of my cheneral duties to enquire if there was anyone who had taken any especial dislike to him, ma'am," the inspector said.

Gabrielle closed her eyes.

"Robert," she said. "Poor Robert. I never liked him myself. I remember him quite well. He and my husband were not friends but business associates. They never quarrelled but they were never intimate."

"Darling, you mean Meyrick, don't you? Meyrick, my father. Your son, not your husband." Frances made the interruption quickly. The fires had died down again. The vital Gabrielle of the morning had disappeared into the shadows once more. This was a very old woman rambling up and down among her memories like a child in a garden.

"Meyrick?" The bright black eyes flicked open with interest. "Where is Meyrick? Send Meyrick up here now at once. I've been asking and waiting for Meyrick for hours. Why isn't he here? Business must wait. I can't deal with people at my age. He must know that I can't look after him all his life."

Dorothea bent over the bed.

"He's away, ma'am. He's abroad, my dear. Mr Meyrick will come sooner or later. Don't you keep fretting."

Her tone was intentionally soothing, but underlying it resentment seethed and boiled. Gabrielle seemed to notice it for she laughed softly.

"Poor Dorothea. And poor Gabrielle. Poor Gabrielle is old. Old. Too old. Let me think. Ask your question again, my man."

It was a gallant effort; the old mind struggling to continue to rouse itself into working order was pathetic, and Bridie's troubled expression grew.

"Ye were saying that ye weren't ver-ry fond of Mr Robert Madrigal yourself, ma'am," he said. "Ye had a few wor-rds wi' him when ye came up here from Hampstead, mebbe?"

"No." Gabrielle seemed perfectly lucid and even forceful. "He was rude to me and I told him I should stay here in my own room until Meyrick returned."

"Until your son retur-rned," said Bridie, snapping down upon what he appeared to regard as an admission.

"Certainly," agreed Gabrielle. "Until my son returned from business."

"Or from abroad?"

The old Gabrielle looked a little frightened. Her black eyes flickered and

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she moved her hands helplessly.

"I forget," she said to Bridie with all the gracious apology of her period and her breeding and all the charm of her eternal feminity. "I'm so old. I forget. Forgive me."

He looked embarrassed, as well he might have been, and Dorothea with her eyes watering bent over her mistress again.

"It's death," she whispered. "Mr Madrigal is dead, ma'am. They've found Miss Phillida's husband dead in the cupboard downstairs. I told you."

Gabrielle stared at her with the astonished look of the baby or the wandering mind.

"Was that today?" she said. "I thought my husband was with me when you came in to tell me that. Oh, dear, the years close up on me. I thought that was years ago. Robert Madrigal dead today and the police in the house? Oh, dear."

Bridie's attitude underwent a complete change.

"I'll apologise for intruding on ye, ma'am," he said, and evidently Gabrielle's old charm had not deserted her for he looked as gallant and as virile as an old man with a prim face and a sober suit may well be. "I won't trouble ye any longer. I'll thank ye ver-ry much and I'll ask ye to excuse me. Good mor-rning."

"Good morning," said Gabrielle and remarked to Dorothea before he was out of the room, "A nice creature. Who did you say he was?"

The divisional detective inspector looked younger and his colour had heightened when he came out onto the deserted landing again.

"She's a grand old lady," he said to Frances in a burst of confidence which he did not often permit himself, "but remar-rkably old. I'm cholly grateful to you for taking me in. I'm glad I saw her. When one's old like that the days and the year-rs appear to get mixed up in one's mind." He sighed and added seriously: "What an awful thing for a poor old body like that! She came here over a week ago, you say?"

"Yes. On the day Robert — on the day we thought Robert went away."

"Ah, she did?" He reconfirmed the point. "That's chust what I under-rstood. And she was thinking about her son, your father, about that time, wasn't she?"

"Yes, I suppose she was. I'd been talking to her about him that afternoon."

"Ye had?" He seemed pleased. "Mebbe that accounts for it. Ye see, on the mor-rning after she came here, ear-rly, before the news of Mr Madrigal's so-called departure was announced, she sent the wee maid Molly down to the post office wi' a cable to your father's agents in Hong Kong. The girl can't remember the message wor-rd for wor-rd, but it was for him to come home immediately. Did ye know that?"

Her face answered him, and he laughed at her kindly.

"Ye'd never mek a liar-r," he said.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He was silent for some little time and then startled her out of her senses by a second question.

"Did you know the little maid, Molly, was dismissed this mor-rning by the old woman who waits on your granny? Tur-rned out of the hoose, she was, not a quar-rter of an hoor after the body was found."

CHAPTER SEVEN

FRANCES WAS ALONE in the breakfast room early the following morning when Miss Dorset came running over with the news. She came in breathlessly, shut the door behind her with unconsciously exaggerated caution and advanced to the table, leaning upon it with one capable hand.

"He's gone," she said.

"Who? Lucar?"

It may have been an ungenerous reaction, but Frances felt her heart jolt with pure hopefulness.

Miss Dorset nodded. Her eyes were bright and her shiny face glowed with excitement.

"Can you beat it? It went through my head yesterday, but I didn't like to say anything of course. I got on to his flat as early as I dared this morning, and his servant said he's still not back. He walked out just before nine yesterday morning and he hasn't been seen since. There's only one explanation that comes to one's mind, isn't there?"

Frances got up. "My God," she said involuntarily. "If it's true. If only it's true!"

Miss Dorset looked at her curiously. "I felt like that myself," she said and sniffed. "It's a relief. There'll be a trial when they catch him, you know. The police are after him already. The servant told me there's been a man hanging about the place all night. Well, I'm not surprised. He was behind all that trouble we've been having at the gallery. I've known that from the beginning. Naturally I couldn't do or say anything about it with Robert Madrigal in charge. *He* had me frightened out of my wits at the end of the time. How *was* he killed? Do you know?"

"No, I don't." The girl's face was haggard and the delicate line of her chin fine-drawn. "That's the most terrifying part of the whole thing. The entire affair has been taken out of our hands. The police come and go and hang round the house and send for us and ask questions and go away again. Norris seems to know most and he gets that by gossiping with the detective on the back en-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

trance. I feel as though we were all sitting blindfolded in a glass case. Everyone can see us and we can't see anybody, not even each other."

Miss Dorset sat down heavily.

"It is a bit like that," she agreed. "Old Mr Worthington wasn't too helpful, was he? Still, you can't expect an elderly solicitor of that sort to be at his best in a case like this. I sent him round, though, you see, because you must all be represented at the inquest, and he was Mr Madrigal's man as well as the firm's."

"He was very kind," said Frances dubiously. "He was here all yesterday afternoon. Phillida couldn't see him, but Gabrielle kept him talking for hours. I tried to get a little information out of him, but he simply patted my hand and told me not to worry. I may be wrong, but my impression was that he didn't want to be mixed up in anything unpleasant."

Miss Dorset raised her pale eyes.

"You can't really blame him, can you?" she said bluntly, and the words were so unexpected that Frances showed her surprise and she laughed awkwardly. "It's not so bad now we know it was Lucar," she said in a singularly unfortunate attempt to sound comforting. "Before that — well, it was very awkward, wasn't it? I mean, my dear, it was so obviously someone in the house that night."

Frances felt the ground tremble beneath her feet.

"I suppose it was," she said dully.

"Well, naturally." Miss Dorset laughed the dry little laugh of the commonsensed. "I was very frightened for you yesterday. . . . He's such a nice man, isn't he? I've admired his painting for years."

There was no mistaking her inference, and the thin blush on her cheeks drove the observation home.

"Oh, I never thought that David had anything to do with it," began Frances firmly, hoping that her face would not betray her.

Miss Dorset squeezed her arm.

"Of course you didn't, my dear," she said devastatingly. "No one would have expected you to."

There was a difficult pause and she went on hurriedly.

"I haven't had a reply to my China cable yet. Your father really is needed here. There's no one in authority left at all next door, except me."

Frances was contrite. "Daddy's coming. I forgot to tell you. A message came last night after you'd gone home. He wired from Alexandria. He's coming on by plane this morning. He'll be here tomorrow. Apparently Gabrielle cabled him last week."

"She did?" Miss Dorset was astounded. For an instant her pale blue eyes were suspicious, and at that danger signal Frances recovered the new poise and

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

caution which had momentarily deserted her.

"Yes," she said easily. "Last week I went up to Hampstead with a tale of woe, and apparently I frightened the old darling and she went into action and sent for Papa."

The story sounded convincing, and if it were not the truth at least it would have to serve. Miss Dorset was appeased.

"Tomorrow," she said. "That *is* good news. Oh, I am glad. Oh, well then, we shall all be perfectly all right. I'll look up the plane and send the car down to meet him. There's a lot of news for him. Mr Godolphin, for one thing. I was glad to hear that he was safe after all this time, but I've not had a moment to think of him. Your father will be delighted over that. Oh dear, this *is* good!"

Her smile was transfiguring.

"It's a terrible home-coming, of course," she added with sudden gravity. "Poor man, what a shock! Still, I shall be relieved to see him."

This information appeared to have quite superseded her own news of importance and she went off almost immediately, completely preoccupied with preparations for Meyrick's return.

The youngest Ivory remained by the window, the straggling yellow light spilling on her hair and her unexpectedly firm chin. Long afterwards, when she looked back on that early morning, it seemed to her that the two hours of comparative peace which followed it were the lull before the hurricane and a special dispensation of providence to enable her to get her breath before the buffeting whirlwind of catastrophe which was to come.

Gabrielle was still asleep in her great brass bed. Phillida was too prostrate to be disturbed, and then there seemed no sense in breaking in on either of them with the gossip.

So it had been Lucar. The information lifted a weight off her lungs as surely as if it had been a physical reality. She felt she could breathe and think again.

She began to think at once of David and she saw him again in her mind's eye as she had seen him from the yard that night. He was quite clear in her memory, standing in the garden room looking down at something with no expression at all on his face. Looking *down*. . . . And then the idiotic request for secrecy about his injured hand.

She walked down the room to rid herself of this line of reasoning and came to a full stop, wondering again exactly how Robert had been killed. She wrenched her mind away with a deliberate effort, and forced herself to think of Lucar. Apart from the fact that he was the sort of man whom one would hope to find guilty of any serious crime in his vicinity, he had practically proved it by running away. Yet it was not going to be quite so easy, she realised. When she had met Lucar at the end of the garden-room passage he had been speech-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

less with injured pride, disappointment and jealousy. Those had been the emotions which had controlled him. He had looked at the ring on her hand and had flung himself out of the house. Conceivably he might have come creeping back afterwards, but if so no one had seen or heard him, and the front door had a spring lock.

Meanwhile David had certainly been in the garden room after Lucar left. She herself had seen him there, looking down. . . .

It was odd that not until then did she remember the handle of the shed turning so slowly in the shaft of light. Until now she had dismissed it as evidence of her own unbalanced imagination, but now the picture came back to her with fresh certainty. Someone must have been in that shed. Someone must have stood hidden in that fitful, breathy darkness, watching and waiting. It could not have been Lucar. She had heard the front door clang behind him as she went down the passage and, even had he rushed round to the back of the house immediately, she must have seen him as she came out onto the iron staircase.

Nor could it have been David, for David had been in the garden room, framed in the brilliant square of the lighted window, even while she watched the handle turn.

Who was it, then? Who else had been moving about the quiet shadowy house that night?

Finally she obeyed her impulse to go down to the yard and look at the shed by daylight. Without pausing to consider why, she avoided the garden-room passage and went out through the kitchen, where an unnatural gloom prevailed. She received a pitying leer from Mrs Sanderson, while Molly glowered at her unreasonably from above a pile of potato peelings. Mercifully neither of them was inclined to talk, and she came out into the yard to see it with the new eyes which disaster lends to familiar objects as a shabbier, homelier place than it had appeared a week before on that night when the wind had been high and the shadows had made mountains of the tall houses on its border.

Today the erstwhile rose garden looked small and dirty, as such air shafts do in a small city.

Frances went over to the shed feeling foolishly guilty. She had no idea what she expected to find in it. Whoever had been hiding there a week before would not, presumably, be there still. Nevertheless she turned the handle cautiously and with some of the wild panic of childhood drew the door open.

She had moved slowly but not quite slowly enough. Although the small room was in darkness the atmosphere struck warm, and out of the tail of her eye she caught the fleeting impression of light hastily extinguished. She stood still, her flesh crawling.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Who," she began in a small unnatural voice, "who's there?"

There was no reply, no movement, and she wavered. The obvious thing to do was to fasten the door and to go back to the house for a light, and she was drawing back when the voice came, casual and unexpectedly familiar.

"It's you, is it, Miss Ivory? Chust come in a moment, will you?"

Divisional Detective Inspector Bridie switched on his torch as he spoke, and the dusty cavern shot into view. He was sitting on an upturned packing case in the far corner, using a pile of whitewood boards as a temporary table. Frances gaped at him.

"You frightened me," she said, speaking directly because it was the truth. "What on earth are you doing here in the dark?"

He chuckled. "Minding my own business," he said affably, adding, "I tur-rned off my light to see what ye might be going to do doon here. Why did you come snooping ar-round?"

"I didn't."

"That's a cholly silly thing to say when I saw ye myself." A great many people besides Frances Ivory had found Ian Alexander Bridie an impossible man with whom to argue. She came further into the shed, struggling with a natural inclination to justify herself, and came to an abrupt pause as she took in the extraordinary collection lying under his square hands. There were some fifteen or twenty long narrow implements, ranging from an ordinary meat skewer to a fine mounting knife in a bone holder, spread out on the whitewood pile.

He let her look for a long time and suddenly swung round, torch in hand, so that the beam fell directly on her face. Evidently what he saw there disappointed him for he set the light down again and sighed.

"I've made a cheneral sear-rch of the two houses," he said conversationally. "I've been everywhere except in your granny's bedroom. Ye can't think of any other wee weapon in this sor-rt of shape, can ye?"

Frances took up a long, blunt blade mounted in a petit-point covered handle. It was one of those mysterious and apparently useless gadgets which had come in a box containing a buttonhook and a shoehorn.

"That's mine," she said, her natural indignation mingling uncomfortably with a new feeling of personal insecurity.

"I know it is," he agreed. "I took it out of a drawer in your dresser. It's too big and too blunt, I'm afraid. That's the sort of chigger I'm after, but it's over shor-rt." He indicated the mounting knife as he spoke. "The old man in the workshop swore it was the longest he had seen in the trade, and I doubt me if he was lying."

"Was Robert killed like that?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"If ye'll say why ye were snooping round in here mebbe I'll tell ye," he suggested. "After all, it'll likely be in the evening papers."

"I came down to see if there was anyone — anything here," she said at last.

"Ye said 'anyone,' " he objected. "A lurkin' blackamoor, mebbe?"

"A what?"

He laughed. "Ye don't listen to ser-rvants' gossip, I see," he said cryptically. "Well, who was it ye were looking for? The wee red-hair-red fellow?"

This time he struck a bull's-eye and seemed pleased at her change of face. Frances stiffened. He was a dangerous old man, an old man who caught one out and surprised one into dangerous admissions.

"I certainly didn't come here to look for Henry Lucar," she said firmly. "Please get that idea out of your mind. I only thought that if anyone was hanging about the house that night this would have been the one place in which they could have hidden and kept an eye on the garden room."

"Ah." He had turned on his packing case and now sat regarding her contemplatively. "Ye thought that, did ye? So did I. Well, I'll keep my bargain. The deceased was killed by a chab in the chest, passing between the fourth and fifth ribs and pier-rcing the hear-rt bag. The blade of the weapon was appr-roximately half an inch or two longer." He jerked his head at the collection on the pile of wood behind him. "These are all overshort," he repeated, "but I'll take 'em along. They're the best I can find."

While she was still digesting this gruesome information he leant forward and remarked quietly: "That's very chenerous of me, considering that ye did not think fit to mention that ye came down to the yar-rd here ye'self on the night of the crime."

She stared at him. Her heart had leapt so violently that her first thought was that he must have heard it.

"How do you know?" It was an idiotic question, revealing and acquiescing, and she heard it come out of her mouth with dismay.

"Your granny's old maid told me."

She stood looking at him, unaware of the picture she made with her head held up a little and the conflicting lights meeting on the clean youthful lines of her face and throat. Dorothea had told him. Dorothea, who had evidently heard it from Gabrielle. It seemed a peculiar piece of secondhand information for her to pass on unless she had some very good reason for doing so, or unless she had offered it as a sop to Cerberus while she hid something more important.

"I did come here that night. I didn't like to interrupt David and Robert by going into the room, so I came out here to see if I could see in through the window. They were talking about my engagement, you see, so naturally I wondered how the interview was going."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Naturally," he said, and she thought his mouth twisted in a half-smile. "How long would you have stood in the yar-rd?"

"About a minute. Perhaps two. I ran in almost at once. I was . . . I mean something frightened me."

"What was that?" He made it sound a most prosaic question, and she told him the story of the shed door opening with growing discomfort.

It did not make a very convincing story, but Bridie noted down the facts on the back of an old envelope without comment.

"Now," he said at last, "when ye looked through the window what did ye see?"

"David and Robert talking." She had told this lie before and it came glibly.

Bridie's pencil hovered over the page, and beneath their deep arches his eyes were thoughtful.

"Ye're certain ye saw both men?"

"Yes."

He sighed and replaced the envelope.

"Ah well," he said, "I'll not be keeping ye, Miss Ivory. Thank ye for your help. By the way," he added as she turned towards the door, "there's one wee point I forgot to mention when I was telling ye how the deceased met his death. There was a contusion on the back of the poor chap's heid and another on his chin. The one on his chin was likely made by a blow from a fist an' was delivered with such violence that there's a likelihood that the assailant's hand was damaged. Now, during this week you've seen Henry Lucar, who's missing. Have ye noticed any mark on his hand?"

It was such a highly improper question from a police officer that she saw the trap.

"No," she said so coolly that he was not sure if she was controlling herself by a superb effort or merely registering disapproval of his methods of interrogation. "I'm afraid I haven't. It's hardly a thing I should have noticed."

Bridie resigned himself to this defeat philosophically, as was his temperament.

"Likely not," he agreed and waited slyly until she was half out of the door before he added briskly, "He's in the hoose now, ye know. Came in forty minutes since and went straight up to your sister — excuse me, half sister."

Frances turned in astonishment.

"Lucar?" she demanded.

"Oh no." He watched her carefully as he spoke. "He's still away, the deleeriously silly fellow. I was speaking of your fiancé, Mr Field. Haven't you seen him this mor-rning? I thought it was odd him coming and asking directly for Mrs Madrigal and odder still that she should see him. Ah well, I'll not detain ye. Never concern yourself about me. I'll chust be in and out all the day."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CHAPTER EIGHT

IT IS QUITE POSSIBLE to cross a yard, enter a house and climb up two flights of stairs without being conscious of movement. Petrifying terror had taken possession of her. At that time she had no jealousy or she would never have burst in on them so unceremoniously. At that moment she was only afraid for David. She did not even knock but wrenched open the door and went straight in, coming to an abrupt halt halfway across the plum-coloured carpet.

By daylight the room's modern opulence was faintly offensive. David and Phillida were caught in their pose like figures on a canvas, vivid against the rich, warm background. They sat on either side of a narrow walnut table, with the gilt telephone between them. Phillida's long bare arms were stretched out across the wood, her head between them bowed in an abandonment of misery. David held her wrists, his hands looking solid and masculine against the transparency of her skin. He was half out of his chair, an arrested picture of compassionate eagerness.

It was only for an instant, of course. Before the door had closed he was on his feet, his hands in his pockets and his uncomfortably handsome face grave and embarrassed, while Phillida sat up slowly and looked at the newcomer with great drowned, pale blue eyes. Nobody spoke. There was a full minute of complete silence, during which Frances realised firstly that there was some sort of emotional crisis going on, secondly that they had some secret from which she was excluded and finally and most shatteringly that there was no earthly reason why these things should not be. After all, she had no proprietary claim on David. Their engagement had been an act of courtesy and obviously did not entail fidelity.

The sensation of disappointment and loneliness which swept over her was so salutary that it startled her into her senses and she grew slowly crimson.

"I'm terribly sorry, you two," she began. "Shall I get out, or . . ."

Her voice died. They were neither of them looking at her but were both eying the telephone with the same degree of fascinated interest. As they watched it began to ring.

Phillida put out her hand and picked up the receiver. She was green. Her mouth was stiff and unmanageable and she closed her eyes.

"Yes?" said Phillida, the word scarcely articulate. "Yes . . . It's me . . . Phillida. Oh, my dear, don't . . . don't bother . . . What? Oh, I am. I am, I am. . . ." The last word was a cry, and a long pause followed while the instrument crackled excitedly. "When?"

The fear in her voice startled both listeners. Her eyes had opened and were wide and ugly.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"So soon? I see . . . Yes, I'm glad. Of course I'm glad. Of course I am. Of course . . . Good-bye . . . Darling, good-bye. . . ."

The instrument clicked but she did not replace it, but sat staring stupidly in front of her. In the end it was David who took the telephone from her and put it back on its stand.

"You didn't tell him," he said accusingly.

She shook her head and began to cry. He turned away from her and strode down the room. Frances was bewildered.

"You ought to have," he said over his shoulder. "It was the only possible thing to do. When does he get here?"

"On Thursday." Phillida whispered the words as if they had been a pronouncement of doom.

"A day after Meyrick? My God, suppose something happens and they meet on the train and the old man tells him."

"Don't, David, don't. Don't, I can't stand it. I can't, I can't, I can't!"

The last word was drowned in a storm of passionate crying. She flung herself across the table and wept with a complete abandonment which was horrible.

David put his hands under her arms and lifted her up.

"Stop it," he said sharply. "Stop it, Phillida. Lie down on this couch thing and pull yourself together."

He put her down gently on the day bed and, taking an eiderdown from the foot, threw it over her.

"Sleep," he said. "You'll want to in a minute, after all that. Sleep, and for heaven's sake get a little courage."

It was considered brutality, expedient in the circumstances. Mrs Madrigal's hysteria died away, to give place to quiet weeping. For a moment the man remained looking down at her. Gradually his own tension relaxed, the careless smile returned to his eyes, and his wide mouth twisted with compassion.

"Poor old girl," he said. "God knows I'm sorry."

She did not move, and presently he turned away towards the door. Frances genuinely thought he was unaware of her own presence altogether. Throughout the whole extraordinary scene he had never once looked in her direction, but now he thrust out an arm and collected her, holding her tightly and sweeping her out of the room with him.

"God, what a time to come barging in!" he said as he closed the latch behind them.

"I'm sorry," she began diffidently. "I had no idea . . ."

He took his arm from her shoulders and pushed her head gently onto one side with the flat of his hand.

"Come off it, ducky," he said. "This isn't the time. That was 'Dolly' Godol-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

phin. Just before you made your entrance the telephone people had announced that a personal call from him to Phillida was due at any moment. Hence the tension. God knows where he was ringing from. I forgot to ask the poor girl. Basra, perhaps, since he's due in the day after tomorrow. Let's go out and have a drink. I need it if you don't."

"No, I don't think I will, not at the moment."

"Why not? My good girl, you can't hang about this ghastly house day in and day out. Let's get out of this, if only for ten minutes. It'll mean that the lad from the police station who follows me about with such doglike devotion has to air his boots again, but I don't see why we should worry about him."

"Are they following you already?" She spoke involuntarily and he raised his eyebrows in genuine astonishment.

"Darling, you're all white and positively tremulous. Isn't that nice? You flatter the old man and make him feel silly. Go and put your hat on. Remember every second saved in the operation means another half inch in the vine tendrils growing round my heart."

He was only half laughing at her and there was a suggestion of unusual colour on his high cheekbones. They were standing on the big dim landing together, surrounded by the closed doors behind which drama, growing every hour, was gathering force and momentum. Frances was very much aware of it all, dark and emotional, mysterious and quite unbearable.

"No," she said definitely. "No, David, I don't want to."

He put both hands on her shoulders and looked into her face. Afterwards she could never make up her mind if his curious half-smile was mischievous, derisive or as oddly shy as it seemed at the time.

"Marry me this afternoon?" he said and waited for incredulity to appear in her eyes.

It came and he laughed, letting her go instantly.

"Why?" Frances was still young enough to put the question in spite of the tension of the hour.

He grimaced at her. "The iodine-stained hand," he said. "By the laws of England no wife can give evidence against her husband. You asked for it, sweetheart. Now will you come out to lunch?"

It was in the grillroom of the comfortable old Biarritz that the little incident occurred. David was buttonholed in the foyer by a man who was obviously a stranger to him, and Frances went on into the restaurant alone. Bertram, the headwaiter, had found her a table near the Piccadilly windows, and she had just settled herself when she saw a familiar face coming down the room towards her at the head of a procession. It was Margaret Fysher-Sprigge with a covey of her cronies fresh from one of their eternal committee meetings. She raised her head

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and smiled as one does smile at the acquaintance of a lifetime and caught the full gamut of the changing expressions on the haggard parrot face. She saw the first formal grin, the wave of startled recognition, the deep flush of embarrassment and the quick snap of the mouth and hardening of the eyes as the face set into the stony mask which is impenetrable. Mrs Sprigge passed on.

It was the first time in her life that Frances had been cut and she knew suddenly that it would not be the last. She was sitting stiffly at the table, her ears burning, when David came up. He looked irritated.

"A damned reporter," he said as he sat down. "I nearly gave him a signed confession and the commissionaire's hat. Have they been much of a nuisance at the house?"

"No. The police see them."

"Oh, of course. God bless the laws of libel and contempt of court. What's the matter with you?"

She told him and he listened with a faintly apprehensive expression which she had not seen in him before.

"Where is she?" he said at last, looking round. "That old trout in the wide awake? Never mind about her. Think of her in the nude. There's nothing like it," he said earnestly. "When insulted by a fish think of it skinned. It takes the edge off anything."

He was treating her like a child, she saw, and she wondered why she did not resent it. It was not a very pleasant meal nevertheless. They were served with suspicious alacrity, and Frances, already self-conscious, thought she noticed a corresponding embarrassment beneath his determined good humour. He did not refer to Phillida, and Frances found that she did not want to broach that particular subject, although it was certainly one which needed an explanation.

At last, as the coffee arrived hard on the dessert, he pushed a cigarette case towards her and eyed her under his lashes.

" 'Dolly' home on Thursday," he said softly. "There are storms ahead, Duchess."

"What do you mean?"

He leant back in his chair and regarded her uncomfortably. His round eyes were serious and compassionate.

"Damn all the trouts," he said unexpectedly. "Where were you when 'Dolly' was around before?"

"In Switzerland most of the time, finishing my education. I met him of course."

"Of course," he agreed absently. "You won't have forgotten him. A colourful bird. I never met a chap with more life or more romance about him. This sensational return from death is typical. The story itself was so terrific, and this

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cap to it supplies just the right touch of the supernatural to make it like him."

They were both silent for a while, remembering the story of Godolphin's death which had moved the world. It had been the Scott incident over again. The three white men with a handful of natives had been forced back by impossible conditions when they were in sighting distance of their goal, the avalanche-ruined lamasery of Tang Quing, perched precariously on the side of a peak which had been rendered well-nigh unclimbable by the disaster. It had been a perilous retreat. Robert was already ill and the natives were frightened and refractory. The crowning tragedy had come when Godolphin smashed his shinbone while negotiating a particularly awkward drop. For two days they had struggled on, carrying him between them down the narrow, broken track. On the third night they had camped on the edge of a snow field, and in the darkness Godolphin had disappeared. There was nowhere for him to have gone save out into some snow-filled crevasse, and it was a miracle how he could have dragged himself even so far. The natives lost their heads in superstitious terror, and finally the two remaining white men, their shouts unanswered, realised that exploration was suicidal and had been forced to accept his gesture and to struggle on alone.

David shook his head.

"Astounding," he said. "A miracle, and so like him. Things are not so hot, lady. Not at all so hot."

Frances sat up. The meal and the change of atmosphere had restored her perspective, and she was exasperated by him.

"Never mind about Godolphin," she said vehemently. "Surely that's the least of the problems! You've let Phillida work you into a flap about a silly sentimental situation which might be tragic and exciting in ordinary circumstances, but now it's purely idiotic. Don't be insane. Don't be blind. I know Phillida wasn't in love with Robert, which is a mercy, but even she doesn't seem to realise that somebody's killed him and that Lucar has run away, but . . . but the police don't seem to be as interested in him as they ought to be."

She broke off, looking at him, her eyes shining with helpless anxiety.

"Can't you see, you silly romantic ape, they're interested in you?"

He sat very still, staring at her with no expression on his face at all, and it came back to her with a sudden stab that this was how he looked when she had seen him from the yard . . . no expression at all and looking down.

When he did speak he made the last remark she could have expected. It was penetratingly true and quite unpardonable.

"Jealous, ducky?" he enquired.

Frances got up. Afterwards, when she had forgotten the intolerable nervous strain of the preceding twenty-four hours, she wondered at her lack of control.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

David caught up with her as she crossed the road to turn down into St. James's. He did not speak but dropped into step at her side, and they strode on in bitter, suspicious silence into the gracious quietude of Sallet Square.

Miss Dorset met the two in the hall, and the pathetic expression on her face, with the pinched red nose and the watery eyes, broke in upon their private crisis with relieving urgency. Her story was simple and disastrous. Meyrick was held up in Brindisi. A case of yellow fever had developed on the plane, and the entire company, passengers and crew, had been clapped into quarantine at the Italian port. There was nothing to be done and no help for it. Meyrick was a prisoner for a fortnight at least.

"He sounded so upset on the phone." Disappointment made Miss Dorset's tone plaintive. "He'd just seen the news of Mr Robert's death. I thought he was going to have a stroke, poor man. What a frightful home-coming for him!"

Frances looked at her blankly. This extraneous piece of bad luck coming in the very midst of disaster seemed to finish everything, and she only realised then how much she had been relying on Meyrick and the return of his blessed authority. Now she was alone again, rather desperately and painfully alone.

Miss Dorset's voice addressing David cut into her thoughts.

"Mrs Madrigal sent down word that you were going to see to everything with Mr Worthington . . . that's the solicitor. I'm so glad," she was saying earnestly. "I'd have done it, of course, but these things do need a man. I only realised just now that it would have to be so . . . so quick. The inquest was adjourned this morning. I don't think Mr Bridie even troubled to go. The pathologist rang up when you were out. It'll have to be the day after tomorrow, I'm afraid."

David frowned. Frances saw him standing there, his fine-boned face animated with distaste and pity.

"Oh, the funeral you mean?" he said. "The day after tomorrow? Really? That's rather hurried, isn't it?"

"Well, no, not really." Miss Dorset was flushed. "The . . . er . . . operation has been done and the pathologist suggested, very nicely of course, that . . ."

"Of course," he said hurriedly. "I was forgetting. Very well then, I'll see to it. I'll go down and see Worthington now. You'll want it very quiet, naturally."

"Oh, I think so. Old Mrs Ivory must be consulted, but I should think as quiet as possible. I'll go and ask her, unless you'd like to, Miss Frances?"

"No." Frances spoke with sudden decision. "No, you go, will you? I'll come up later. I want a word with Mr Field."

She waited until the woman was out of sight before she went into the breakfast room. He followed her, his hands in his pockets and his shoulders hunched.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Phillida asked me, you know," he said. "Someone's got to do it for the poor girl. It's a horrible job."

It was not that the words sounded like an excuse, and thereby inferred that she needed one. But the remark jarred on her and she plunged wildly into the awkward statement she had planned.

"Look here, David," she said, realising that her cheeks were flushed but unaware that she looked young and a trifle dishevelled, "this entire business has got hopelessly out of hand from our point of view. I mean last week, when you were awfully kind and made the terrific gesture, neither of us realised what was coming to us. Wouldn't you like to call the engagement joke off? I feel I'm dragging you into this mess, and it's all rather beastly and shame-making and will be worse later on."

She was looking at him directly, but after the first word or so he had not met her eyes but had wandered over to the window and now stood staring out through the gauze curtains at the square.

She had no idea what she expected of him. Her first impression was that he was going to laugh at her, but his complete silence was disconcerting.

"We're going to be the Piccadilly lepers, I can see that. It's no good being paralysingly decent and sticking by us. You get away while you're uncontaminated."

Again he let her words die in the room and then, while the silence still ticked uncomfortably, shrugged his shoulders.

"I'd like to," he said simply. "There's nothing I feel I'd rather do."

"Well, you go," she said blankly.

He laughed and came over to her.

"Darling," he said, "you're lovely. All elementary and untrodden, just plain unadulterated female youth. It's disgustingly rare and painfully attractive. As a rule this is the point where the old cad packs up. However, look over here."

He took her back to the window and pointed to a solitary figure idling against the railings of the square.

"There he is," he said, "boots and all. If I leave the house he goes too. This is a solemn moment. For the first time in his life the old man is trapped, Duchess."

His hand was on her shoulder and she felt it tighten briefly.

"If he wasn't there you'd go," she said.

"My God, I would," said David Field.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CHAPTER NINE

TO EVERYONE'S ASTONISHMENT Gabrielle put her foot down about the funeral, and in her decree the great Victorian instinct for social self-preservation became apparent.

"Quiet?" she demanded, sitting up in her chair as she did in the afternoons. "At a time like this? Don't be ridiculous. My dears, we do not admit that there is any scandal. Our poor wretched relation has died, and we owe it to ourselves to see him buried in a right way. Besides, if a few sensation mongers are going to crowd round the house, for heaven's sake, give them something to gape at."

She disapproved strongly of David's share in the arrangements and told him so, but since his name had already been mentioned to the solicitors she agreed that "less talk" would arise from his continuing the work than from his being superseded in it, and she had him and old Worthington, together with the undertaker, up in her room for the best part of an hour.

Some of her decisions were out of date, but Frances, who was appointed her lieutenant in the business, began to recognise for the first time the awe-inspiring common sense behind the absurdities of that great social code of the day before yesterday. She did what she was told and bought black for herself, Phillida and every servant in the house, and with Miss Dorset she sat up late into the night sending "intimations" and instructions for the despatch of flowers to everyone who might possibly have some claim to be informed.

The gruesome preparations added to the horror of the situation by a hundred per cent. Plain-clothes men on guard outside the house helped to bring wreaths into the hall. Startled dress-shop women with a couple of mannequins apiece were shown into Gabrielle's bedroom, where she kept them parading up and down in funereal splendour until she was satisfied that her granddaughters were to be suitably clad.

Nobody wept. There was a grim purpose in the proceedings and a strange element of gallantry.

Frances, her arm full of black chiffon, ran into David outside Phillida's door on the night before the interment.

David was visibly shaken. He looked younger and more vulnerable and his eyes were shocked.

"It's archaic," he said. "Utterly horrible. My God, if one had liked the fellow it would have driven one mad. I say, did you know? They've picked up Lucar. It's in the stop press tonight. He wired from mid-Atlantic or something equally preposterous. It's extraordinary the way the police go about the house, brushing one on the stairs, nodding to one in the passages, yet never telling anything. Quite reasonable, I suppose, but disconcerting. Still, who's going to

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

worry about Lucar or anyone else while this is going on? With Grandmamma's macabre pantomime taking place all round one everything else blurs."

Frances agreed. She was very weary, and in the last few days the skin had contracted over her fine bones, leaving her face pointed and fragile. He looked at her sharply and spoke with a flicker of his old manner.

"Don't let it get you," he said. "It's wise, you know. She's absolutely fantastic, but she's dead right. It's sensible. In fact it's genius. It leaves all the doors open. People who aren't sure how the cat's going to jump can send flowers and stay away and so save their faces in any eventuality. If by a miracle the whole stink blows over amicable relations can be resumed without heartburning . . . if it does."

The thought seemed to worry him for he glanced at Phillida's door and frowned.

"Are you going in to her? I wish you would." His concern for the other woman was urgent and personal. Frances imagined that she understood it and felt again the age-old stab which the Marthas of this world must always feel when the Marys score their inevitable triumphs.

David was embarrassed. "I've been with her all the evening," he said. "Do you know, I don't think she ought to be left."

"I'll stay with her." Her tone betrayed her and he glanced behind him. She saw him for a moment with the visor up. His eyes were helpless and his expression unexpectedly supplicant.

"Have a heart, Duchess," he said.

Afterwards she realised that they came as near to understanding one another then as ever before, but at that moment the door was flung open and a haggard relic of Phillida Madrigal appeared on the threshold.

"Whispering," she said breathlessly. "Whispering outside the door. It goes on all the time. I can't stand it. Can't you come in?"

"My dear, I'm so sorry. I didn't realise how near we were." Frances turned into the room at once. "Look here, Gabrielle says . . ." Her words died as Phillida took the dress from her arms and threw it across a chair.

"I don't think I shall want an evening dress again," she said abruptly. "Tell Gabrielle so. Tell Gabrielle . . . tell Gabrielle . . ." Her mouth trembled out of control and Frances put an arm round her.

"Sit down," she said firmly. "I'm sorry we stood talking out there. Never mind about the clothes. Gabrielle's old, you know, and she's fussy. It's a ghastly business, but we've got to get it over somehow."

"Get it over?" Phillida sat huddled in the chair like an old woman. Frances glanced at her uneasily.

Outside the wind had risen again. It crept round the house, fitful and mis-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

chievous, a living enemy trying to penetrate the fastness of the house.

Frances knelt down before the fire and sat back on her heels.

"Whispering," said Phillida suddenly. "Damned whispering everywhere. It's getting on my nerves. I'm growing like Robert, imagining things. Frances, have you ever wished that you were dead? Have you ever sat and wished with all your soul that you had the courage to kill yourself?"

"Yes," said Frances definitely. Her instinct was for caution. "Yes, I have, but not for long. It passes, you know, that's the mercy of it. It doesn't last."

"This will." Phillida was whispering herself, and for the first time in her life the histrionic effect was not calculated. "You don't remember 'Dolly,' do you?"

Frances glanced at her in exasperation. If Phillida had suddenly decided to mourn for Robert it might possibly have been bearable, but to find her preoccupied with a romantic anxiety was distasteful.

"Yes, I do," she said vaguely.

Phillida shivered. "I remember everything about him. He had such force, Frances, such incredible force. He'll be here tomorrow. After the funeral the bell will ring and there'll be more whispering and steps outside and he'll be here."

Frances scrambled to her feet.

"You go to bed," she said. "Take some aspirin and get some sleep."

Phillida was not listening to her. Her face looked ghastly in the bright electric light.

"I'm frightened," she burst out suddenly. "You can't possibly understand. Frances, do you think David could have been in love with me all these years?"

"David?"

"Yes. He was in love with me once. I treated him abominably, I know, but some men are peculiar when you do that. If he was a suppressed sentimental type he might . . . And that would be too horrible. What should I do?"

"Somehow I shouldn't worry about that." Frances knew that she sounded brutal and decided that it could not be helped.

Phillida shook her head.

"It's more than worrying. You don't know," she said. "Suppose David had known, somehow, that 'Dolly' was going to be found? Suppose he'd had some sort of psychic intimation? Suppose Robert had told him, as he told me?" The final words seemed to frighten her, for she clapped her hands over her mouth. "I didn't say that!" she burst out like a hysterical child. "I didn't say that. You didn't hear me."

Frances rang the bell.

"I'm going to send for Dorothea and we're putting you to bed," she an-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nounced. "You'll drive yourself out of your mind if you go on like this."

"You didn't believe what I said?" Phillida was frankly hysterical.

"I didn't even hear it," said Frances with feeling.

Phillida was still crying when they got her into bed, and old Dorothea sat by her until she slept, but in the morning she pulled herself together. She came down comparatively early, a graceful greyhound figure in her black suit, looked at the flowers and even let Mrs Sanderson weep to her a little. Frances saw her on that morning standing stiffly by a tremendous wreath from the employees at 39. Her chin was up and her eyes were blank. Even then, before she understood, then, while the whole terrible complication was still unknown to her, she recognised that blind courage and the picture of it sank deep into her mind.

The funeral itself was one of those unbelievable pieces of picturesque nightmare which sometimes slip into real life to remind one that there is nothing so painfully absurd that it cannot happen. To begin with, the wind had risen almost to gale force. It raced round the square, tormenting and blinding, irritating the horses and disarranging the flowers. It was like Gabrielle to insist on horses. No motor hearse in the world can convey the same macabre dignity which six brown-black horses, complete with silver buckles and black plumes, can produce with a single rattle of their well-oiled hoofs. The plumes were the undertaker's own contribution. He was an elderly man who recognised a real Victorian when he met one. The plumes had been resurrected, therefore, for the first time since the war had given Londoners new and simpler ideas about interment. Now they stood high in their silver sconces on top of the hearse and on the nodding heads of the black horses, looking like bunches of gigantic crepe palm leaves. The wind leapt on them with a squeal of triumph as they waved before the breakfast-room windows, and Robert Madrigal waited for the last time for his friends.

There were few friends. Flowers had arrived by the cartload, but the fashionable crowd was absent. However, there was no dearth of mourners. The newspapers had announced the event, and the square was full of sober, idle people, not one of whom had so much as nodded to the living Robert but who had come to watch his burying as they would have come to watch any other procession with a bit of a tale to it. They helped considerably, of course. Frances realised that when she came back from the grim, chilly little ceremony and everybody met in the drawing room to thaw and to drink and forget if they could that vast sad cemetery.

Here the guests were comparatively few. Most of the staff from 39 was present, of course, as were the usual collection of obscure relatives who always appear at weddings and funerals like some sort of family phenomena, while old Worthington had come, and a decayed gentleman who belonged to Robert's

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

club and had owed him money. But for the rest there were only telegrams and last-minute flowers.

The only uninvited guests in the house were the police. They hung about shamefully, like bailiffs, secretly a trifle overawed. The expedition itself had been preposterous. Since Robert had no relatives nearer than South Africa a Victorian stoicism had decreed that his widow should travel in the first limousine accompanied by a startled old nephew of Gabrielle's own as her escort.

Frances herself, with David in his capacity as her fiancé, had gone next, and behind them rode Miss Dorset, supported by the head of the clerical department from the gallery.

It had been a brave show, as formal and courageous as Gabrielle herself. Mrs Ivory's ultimate act of gallantry was her personal appearance in the drawing room. She was waiting for them when they came in, enthroned in the largest of the wing chairs with Dorothea, like a sentinel, behind her.

Lawrence's full-length portrait of Philip Ivory as a young man smiled down at her, and the light from the lustres which had seen her in her glory picked up the folds of her moiré skirt. As a spectacle she took a lot of beating, and the unhappy company, in whose mind the words "mystery," "something queer," "scandal," "murder," were taking larger and larger space, turned to her with admiration and relief.

Yet it was not easy. Everyone in the room felt the same sense of responsibility, the same sensation of herding together in the face of disaster, while beneath this there was that other feeling, the sneaking sensationalism which murmurs, "This may be an unforgettable experience. Who knows, I may be rubbing shoulders with a murderer at his victim's funeral."

Frances was with Gabrielle when Norris came in. The old lady had both her granddaughters near her. Phillida, looking as if she were on the verge of collapse, sat in a chair only a trifle smaller than Mrs Ivory's own, while Frances stood on the other side. She realised that they must make a fantastic little group and was relieved when David came up behind her.

"Just like the family album. You've no idea," he murmured. "Want a drink?"

"A small prussic acid, please." She let the flippancy escape her without taking her eyes from the door. Norris was worming his way towards them. He looked anxious.

He spoke very quietly and yet everyone seemed to hear him. Godolphin. The name fled round the room as audibly as if he had screamed it aloud, and it snatched attention from the one all-absorbing but unfortunately unmentionable topic which was concerning the company. They pounced on it, and the general interest flared.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Godolphin, who had crept out on a ledge of icebound rock to die rather than jeopardise the chances of his companions' safety? Godolphin, who had been discovered on the point of death by a party of monks and carried up by them to a fortress which hitherto had been no more than a legend? Godolphin, who had been a prisoner for close to four years, to escape at last with a pilgrim train? Here was romance; here was warmth; here was colour!

Frances caught a glimpse of David's grey face and saw his eyes turn to Phillida, but she was hidden in the depths of her chair, and even then the younger girl had no inkling of the great obvious fact which rose up so monstrously before her eyes that it escaped her altogether.

Norris went out again, and this time the crowd made a path and stood looking at the tall door covered by the silk portiere curtain with the Chinese panel. Memory is an unaccountable possession, and Frances, who until that moment had had only a hazy impression of the explorer, now received a clear vision of him as she had seen him last five years before. He had been a gaunt whirlwind of a man, not particularly tall but thick-boned and sturdy, with a shock of very black hair standing on end above an eagle nose and narrow eyes. She looked for him with interest when Norris reappeared, stepping back to hold the door open.

There was a long pause, and then into the room came a small, withered, elderly man, walking with a stick.

It was not altogether an anticlimax. Many people present remembered Godolphin before his last trip, and David's single muttered expletive expressed their reaction.

Godolphin came uncertainly down the room towards them, and their first impression receded a little. It *was* Godolphin. The much-photographed face was recognisable under the harsh yellow skin, but the hair was white and close cropped and he stooped with the weakness of a man who has undergone a great physical hardship.

He came up to Gabrielle and bent over her hand with a touch of his old bombast.

"Forgive me," he said gently in the rather high, metallic voice which Frances had forgotten. "I didn't know. Your man told me the news on the doorstep. I'm just off the plane. I haven't seen a paper or spoken to a soul. I came straight to Phillida, naturally."

Fortunately he was speaking softly, and the crowd, remembering its manners, made hasty conversation. Only the old woman and the four who surrounded her heard him clearly.

Gabrielle looked up.

"Naturally?" she enquired abruptly. "Why 'naturally,' Mr Godolphin?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He turned to Phillida, and the movement of his outstretched hand had a quality of finality and homecoming about it.

"It's still a secret, is it, my dear?" he said gently.

Phillida whimpered. There was no other word for that dreadful animalic little sound. She was straining back in her chair as if she would force herself into the upholstery.

A bewildering thought struck Frances and she looked at Gabrielle. The old woman was rigid, her black eyes contracted into slits of startling intelligence. It was only then that the youngest Ivory recognised the truth, and with it the appalling explanation of a dozen mysteries of the past unbearable week. The facts came thundering into her mind with the force of revelation. Phillida had married him. Phillida must have married Godolphin before the Tibetan expedition, and now, as he stood smiling before them, Godolphin knew no more about Robert than that he was dead.

CHAPTER TEN

THE DRAWING ROOM looked despoiled as rooms do when a crowd has recently departed from them.

Outside the wind was at its fidgety worst, and to Frances at least the memory of those days was ever afterwards accompanied by the mischievous music of that irritating, ill-tempered breeze.

The old Gabrielle sat huddled in her chair by the graceful fireplace with the fluted columns. She looked so old that it seemed incredible that there should still be sufficient blood in her body to feed the intricate experienced brain behind her shrewd eyes.

David leant against the mantelpiece, watching her, with Frances at his feet on the hearthrug. She sat with her knees drawn under her, her black dress making her look younger than ever in spite of the new maturity which was etching itself upon her face.

The fourth member of the party remained expressionless. Dorothea stood behind her mistress like a soldier behind his king.

Phillida and Godolphin had been alone in the breakfast room for forty minutes now. The walls were thick and no sound had escaped to give the little gathering waiting in the drawing room any indication of the way in which that grimly dramatic interview progressed.

Everyone deferred to Gabrielle. She had insisted that they stay beside her, and if it was obvious that she was keeping them under her eye so that they

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

should not talk too much among themselves it was also clear that she was controlling the situation by a terrific effort of will power alone. Meanwhile the silence was nerve racking.

David took out his cigarette case, looked at it and put it back again. Gabrielle eyed him.

"You knew about this," she said. It was not a question, and he did not deny it.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I did. I was a witness at the wedding. It was when I was over here last time, about four years ago. I'd been seeing Phillida quite a lot, as you may remember." He looked down at Frances. "You were at school," he said.

Gabrielle shut her lips tightly, but if he noticed the gesture he ignored it and went on speaking, half to her and half to Frances.

"Phillida phoned me one day and told me she was getting married, but that it was to be all done in secret. 'Dolly' was broke, or something equally undesirable. She asked me if I'd go along and support them at the ordeal. I did. I was the only friend of bride or groom at the Registry Office, and I signed my name and wished 'em luck. I went back to the States a couple of days later and the next I heard of Godolphin was that he had died out in the wilds on this expedition. I gathered from the press accounts that there'd been no mention of his marriage so I took it that the whole affair was washed out. Then when I came back a few weeks ago I found that Phillida had married Robert and naturally I held my tongue because it was her affair and not mine. However, last week, when the whole situation blew sky-high, I did come to see her and I offered her my heartfelt advice, which was to get hold of 'Dolly' quickly and break the news as gently as possible before he got back and someone else told him. Unfortunately, when she did have an opportunity on the transcontinental phone she funked it. One can't really blame the poor girl, but it was a pity. It would have saved this ghastly tragicomedy this afternoon anyway."

There was silence again after he had spoken. Gabrielle rocked herself to and fro, her eyes narrowed and her mouth twisting to fit unuttered words. Frances stared into the fire. David's laconic account of the secret wedding had not deceived her. During the last few days she had learnt enough about love and enough about people to clothe that skeleton story. She understood now why he had been so cautious when she had coupled Phillida and Godolphin in her first conversation with him in the Café Suprême, and she recognised the reason for his faint air of responsibility where Phillida was concerned. Behind his lazy voice she had caught a glimpse of the cruel if childish gesture of the two adventurers when they had decided to honour the unsuccessful boy friend with their secret. No doubt his presence had lent the occasion just the extra

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

touch of piquancy so dear to their fey postwar generation. It must all have been very young and dramatic and for David unhappy and humiliating if also educational.

She looked up at him and found him watching her, half amused by his own embarrassment. He looked away at once.

"It's a fine old mess now, anyway," he said. "Pelion piled on Ossa. Where do we go from here?"

"She didn't ought to be worried." The passionate ungrammatical statement bursting from Dorothea startled everybody.

Gabrielle laughed. It was the first sound of the kind that the house had heard for a week, and the room itself seemed to lighten.

"How true," she said. "That's very kind of you, Dorothea. Mr Field, I never in my life allowed anyone to smoke in this room, but now you may light a cigarette."

David did not smile but he thanked her and took out his case.

The nerve-racking waiting continued. The entire house seemed to be listening.

"He'll have to see reason," said Frances suddenly. "It's an impossible business, and Godolphin will have to be reasonable. After all, it's quite clear how the thing happened."

"Hush." Gabrielle raised a small yellow hand. "Listen, they're coming."

They blinked at her. Her uncannily acute hearing in this house which she knew so well was always astonishing. It was almost a sixth sense with her, depending on a complicated system of old memories and instincts rather than an actual sound.

She was right, of course. Almost immediately the inner door which connected the breakfast room with the eastern end of the drawing room jarred as the handle turned vigorously and Godolphin appeared. He looked back over his shoulder.

"Come on," he said. "They're all here."

He held the door wide open but there was no sign of Phillida, and presently he disappeared again, to return a moment or so later leading her by the hand. They made an extraordinary pair coming across the rose-pink Chinese carpet together. Godolphin had lost much of the withered, broken appearance which had so shocked them on his first arrival. Whatever else the interview had done it had certainly stimulated him. There was animation in his movements now, and a great wave of nervous energy swept into the room with him, reminding them that he was still a personality. It occurred to Frances for the first time that he might be very angry.

Phillida drooped. She looked utterly exhausted. David pulled up a chair for

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her, and Godolphin lowered her into it. His manner was possessive and authoritative, and the old Gabrielle, who was watching him with lynx eyes, let her hands flutter in her lap.

"Well?" she said. It was a grim word, so much better than any conventional condolence or excuse, and Godolphin, who had had his back to her, turned with quick interest as he recognised a personality.

"It's ghastly," he said, his thin high voice snapping out the words. "Horrible. A great shock for you all. . . . Not a comforting story for me. There's only one thing to be done. I've been explaining that to my wife. We must all pull together, get this mystery cleared up and then she and I must start afresh."

He made an alarmingly important figure standing before them, his dried flesh clinging to his bones and his whipcord face so thin that the double line of his jaw stuck out in high relief. He was leaning heavily on his stick.

"Oh, but how sensible." The old Gabrielle used an ingratiating tone which none of them had heard from her before. "You're quite right, of course, Mr Godolphin. The police must be left to make their enquiry into Robert's death, and any mystery there must be settled utterly and beyond question before any other . . . adjustment can be considered. Until that is done you will keep away from Phillida and from this house, naturally. What will you do? Go abroad again?"

"No, dear lady," he said. "I've just spent two years in a filthy lamasery jail, or correction cell as they are pleased to call it, thinking of my home and my wife, and believe me I'm not going to lose either of them again."

His final words clattered in the silent room, and the old woman stiffened visibly.

"I see," she said quietly. "And so what do you suggest?"

"That we get on with the work at once and see the whole hopeless mess settled. That's the only thing to do. The entire affair must be taken in hand at once and, since it affects me principally, I'll do it myself."

Phillida gripped the arms of her chair and struggled to control her voice.

"He doesn't understand," she said helplessly. "He wants to stay in the house."

"That, of course, is impossible." Gabrielle spoke flatly and without intonation in her brittle voice.

"I don't think so." Godolphin was equally decisive. "You're all approaching this thing from the wrong angle. Here you are, a houseful of women completely at the mercy of the police. Your solicitor appears to be worse than useless. Field can't do much because he has no authority and isn't even a permanent resident in the country. You must have somebody to manage things. There's absolutely no reason why I shouldn't stay here as a guest and do what I can to clear things up. After all, I bring a fresh mind to it and I'm not hampered by the silly

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

conventional mind tracks of this so-called civilised country."

"But, my dear chap" — even David was forced to protest — "use your imagination. However unpleasant the realisation is, don't ignore what has happened. Phillida married Robert in all good faith, and he, poor chap, is only barely in his grave."

Godolphin turned on him. He was trembling and the veins at the sides of his forehead were prominent.

"I do realise that," he said. "My God, that's the one thing I do realise."

It was the first open sign of anger which he had revealed and it sent a thrill of apprehension through each of them. Godolphin laughed abruptly.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but you forget. Where I've been rotting slowly out of existence the niceties have been absent. I've come back with a clear mind. I don't care if a thing's good form or even if it's socially dangerous. I want to take Phillida away. She's my wife, remember, not Robert's, and since she won't come away with me until this blasted mystery's cleared up then I'll clear up the mystery, and no one on God's earth shall get in my way. Is that plain enough?"

Nobody spoke. Phillida was crying openly and her shuddering breath was the only sound in the big room.

Godolphin confronted Gabrielle.

"If you won't have me in the house, Mrs Ivory," he said, "I'll stay in the nearest hotel, but if you've any sense you'll use me, not frustrate me."

The old woman considered him, her bright eyes frankly speculative.

"Thank you for your offer," she said with surprising meekness. "Yes, Mr Godolphin, we shall be very pleased if you will consider yourself my son's guest for a few days." She paused and smiled at him. "You will behave like a guest, of course?"

For an instant they regarded each other steadily, both of them adventurers in their way, and presently he laughed.

"You're very wise," he said. "Yes, I'll behave."

The old Gabrielle sighed, a sound of resignation.

"I am very tired," she remarked and went on talking in a detached fashion. "No, Dorothea, I'll come presently but not yet. First of all there is something I have to say to all of you. First of all I am an old woman. I am so old that half the time my mind wanders abominably, but usually in the evenings it becomes very clear, and just at this particular time I think I may be seeing things more vividly than any of you, because I have one great advantage. I am apart. My life is at its end. I do not know if you realise it, but although some of you are my grandchildren you are all strangers to me. You are not only out of my generation but out of my span."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She was leaning back, infinitely frail in a barricade of stiff black silk. Her hands were folded placidly and if her performance had an ulterior motive, as Frances, who had seen one or two of them, was inclined to suspect, it was certainly tremendously impressive.

"As I see it you have all developed one great weakness during the past hour," she remarked, a hint of complacency in her tinkling voice. "You have all got a secret now which somehow or other you must keep from the police. Before this afternoon Phillida had that secret and so had Mr Field. Now Frances knows it and so does Dorothea, and I know it."

She paused and looked at Godolphin, who was staring at her incredulously.

"And so do you," she said. "Now, when the police talk to you you must all be very careful. The standard of intelligence among the police is far higher than I had supposed." There was a world of unconscious snobbery in the final observation, and they realised that she had probably never spoken to a policeman before in her life.

"Do you know, I don't think it matters." Godolphin made the announcement with the force and recklessness which had been noticeable in him ever since his interview with Phillida. "The police are sensible people. They want to know the truth and so do we. We must work with them; not against them. They'll want to know the facts of this marriage mix-up, and I don't see why they shouldn't have them. If we hadn't kept our marriage a secret this wretched complication would never have cropped up. My death would have to have been proved, or Phillida would have to have waited for seven years or whatever the period is before she could have presumed it. As far as I can find out from Phillida poor old Robert must have died last Monday week, just about the time when I was lying under a mass of stinking goatskins, being smuggled over the border in a mule train. As Robert died I came to life. Phillida never had two husbands at once, so where's the immorality? They won't prosecute her for bigamy. While she was married to Robert I *was* dead to all practical purposes. The police are reasonable, surely."

"Oh no, 'Dolly,' no. Don't tell." They had half forgotten Phillida, and her panic-stricken appeal startled them. "You don't know. You don't understand. Robert was queer before he died, and sort of psychic. I used to think he'd guessed about you and me. For the last year he'd talked about you to all sorts of people. He talked to you about him, didn't he, David?"

"To me?" David seemed surprised. "No," he said cautiously. "No, I don't think he did."

"Oh well, he did to me. Sometimes I was sure he knew about the marriage. This last six months has been hell, absolute hell."

Old Mrs Ivory refolded her hands and her eyes rested on Godolphin's face.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"There, you see," she said placidly. "Phillida should not be allowed to talk, should she?"

"Why not?" Godolphin was vigorously rational. "Anyone can see what happened there. Robert happened to mention my name by chance one day and that started up the poor girl's guilty conscience. Look at her, poor darling. She's a mass of hysteria now and must have been for months."

Gabrielle beckoned Dorothea.

"You can take me up now," she said and added, "the police are so unimaginative, my dear man. That's why you must be so careful. Given that story they might almost consider that poor Phillida had a motive, mightn't they?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IT WAS RAINING when Miss Dorset took up the squalling telephone from among the piles of scattered papers on her desk. It had been raining for the best part of a week and the square was cold and sodden.

She approached the instrument cautiously. Just lately some of the calls had not been pleasant experiences.

"Hello," she said briskly. "Hello. Who? Oh yes, Miss Dorset speaking. Yes, of course I remember you. You're Mr Lucar's man, aren't you? I'm afraid I haven't any news for you yet. I should just carry on as I told you."

"Wait a minute, miss. I've got a bit of news for you. I've 'eard from my guv'nor."

"Have you?" Her surprise escaped her and he laughed contentedly.

"I know. It took me back a bit, an' that's a fact. I'd got it well in my 'ead that 'e'd given me the walkout. Milk's not paid, nor papers, nor my wages. I was certain I'd said good-bye to that lot, which was why I got on to your firm. They employed 'im, I thought, so per'aps they'd see to me."

"Yes, yes, so you said. You've heard from him, you say?"

"I 'ave. A wire from a ship. Listen. 'Expect me sleep flat tonight, Lucar.' " There was a faint sardonic chuckle. "Sure of 'isself, ain't 'e?"

"He *is!* I mean, of course." Miss Dorset floundered and recovered herself. "Oh, well then, if he's coming back you're all right, aren't you? Thank you for telling me."

"Not at all." The voice was cocky. "I thought you'd like to know. I never thought 'e done it. I told you. I say, you there?"

"Yes. Thank you very much for ringing. Good-bye."

Miss Dorset replaced the receiver and sat looking in front of her with intro-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spective eyes. She took up an envelope from the pile to her left and slit the cheap paper open. After a glance at the opening sentence she pitched the lightly scribbled page into the basket, unread. Her hand wavered and she took up the telephone and dialled 38's number. She got Frances immediately.

"Hello. Oh, it's you, Miss Dorset?" The disappointment was well suppressed. "How are you getting on? Are there many of them?"

"A few. I thought I'd better go through them myself. I really didn't know there were so many lunatics at large. It's having an address in the reference books, I suppose. If they'd sign their names it wouldn't be so bad. There are one or two genuine personal letters for Mrs Madrigal, by the way. I'll send those over."

"It's abominable, isn't it?" Frances' voice was savage over the wire. "Don't people realise they can't know the truth just by reading a few beastly newspapers? All the letters are for Phillida, are they?"

"Yes, most of them."

"Any for me?"

"One or two." Miss Dorset eyed the solid heap on the right-hand side of the desk and hoped she might be forgiven.

"What do they say?"

"Oh, nothing really. Just abuse. It's purely pathological. I asked Inspector Bridie and he says it always happens."

Frances laughed unnaturally. "I like him," she said, "or at least I would if I wasn't so afraid of him."

"Afraid?"

"Oh, not seriously. I mean it's all practically settled now, isn't it? Or it will be as soon as they bring Lucar back, won't it?"

"I should think so, my dear." Long years of discretion taught her voice just the right degree of noncommittal cheerfulness. "One or two of these anonymous letters to Mrs Madrigal mention Mr Godolphin. I don't like to say anything to her myself, but people do remember that they were once engaged and it does give them such a handle. He's still determined to stay in the house, is he?"

"I'm afraid he is. He works like a fiend. It's like having a policeman present at every meal."

Miss Dorset coughed.

"That kind of person is very trying but they're also very useful sometimes," she said.

"Yes, I know."

There was a brief pause.

"I haven't seen Mr Field for a day or two." In her effort to make the question

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

casual it sounded to Miss Dorset herself that she underlined it unmercifully.

"No," said Frances. "No. Nor have I. You'll send the genuine letters over then, will you?"

"Yes, I will. Good-bye. Is Mrs Ivory all right?"

"Amazingly well. Good-bye."

Ten minutes later the phone in the breakfast room at 38 tinkled again, but when Frances leapt on it she was just in time to hear the soft click on the wire which meant that someone else in the house had also expected a call, and Phillida's nervous voice said urgently:

"Is that Doctor Smith now? This is Mrs Madrigal. Put me through. Put me through, please. Put me through."

Frances hung up, and across the city a nurse grimaced as she handed the instrument to a thin man with a tired face.

"No," he said gently after the phone had crackled at him for a full minute. "We threshed all this out yesterday. Go to bed and stay there with a book. I'll come and see you about four o'clock, but please don't ask me to do the impossible."

"Why not?" Phillida was unusually decisive. "It wouldn't matter. Really it wouldn't matter. I *was* in my room all that day. I didn't go down except once when old Mrs Ivory came over in the afternoon. Why shouldn't you say I couldn't move?"

"Because it's not true."

"Does that matter so much?"

"Do you expect me to answer that question?"

"No. No. I don't know. I'm sorry. I'm mad. I'm ill. I don't know what I'm doing. You won't tell anyone I asked you?"

"I'm not unprofessional as a rule."

"I know you're not. I didn't mean that. Come and see me."

"Would you like to go into a nursing home?"

"I would. Oh, I would! Do you think it would look as though I were running away? No, I'd better not. No."

"I'll come and see you this afternoon. Good-bye."

"And yet I don't believe it," he continued to the nurse as she hung up for him. "That woman's a neurasthenic, not a maniac. If she killed her husband I'll eat my brass plate and go and keep chickens."

"I wonder you don't keep away from her all the same," said the nurse practically. "No one, not even a man with your reputation, can afford to be mixed up in that sort of thing."

"You're horribly right," he agreed gloomily, "but I'm sorry for her. You don't know her, do you? She's got a certain charm."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

At this precise moment Detective Sergeant Randall of the N Division was standing in a public telephone booth on a dreary wind-swept railway station talking to Divisional Detective Inspector Bridie.

"Got him, sir," he reported briefly.

"Ye have, have ye? Cholly good. What's he like?"

"Cocky, sir."

"Ah, he is? I thought that would be likely. Bring him along."

"Right, sir. The train goes in seven minutes. We'll be with you before five."

The Orkney man grunted and hung up. Then he took up the house phone and got through to Inspector Withers, a placid, painstaking man in whom he had great faith.

"Any results?" he enquired, cocking his head on one side at the mouthpiece.

"A blank . . . sir." Withers added the courtesy as an afterthought. The two men were friends but he was in a bad temper. "I've been through every perishing report, forty-seven of 'em. No nigger for miles. Not a soul in or about those two houses on the night in question saw hide or hair of a nigger except those two hysterical women."

Bridie sniffed. "Mrs Sanderson may be an emotional pairson," he conceded, "and mebbe the girl Molly is not par-rticularly strong in the heid, but when those two women say they saw a nigger walk past the kitchen window into the yar-rd chust before dusk that day I was inclined to believe them."

Withers was still polite but it was with an effort. "I'm sorry, but a more cock-eyed tale I never laid ears to. Why didn't they raise cain at the time?"

"Because the yar-rd was in chuxtaposition to the picture gallery next door, and strange pairsons were forever walking down there."

"I see. Well, if that's so why wasn't this blinking nigger likely to be one of the . . . er . . . strange pairsons with a right to be there? Fetching a packing case or something. Why bother about him?"

"Because he had no right to be there. No one knew of him. Ye say so yourself, man."

Withers remained unimpressed. "I'll go on following it up, of course," he said.

"That's right," agreed Bridie with exasperating satisfaction.

"Any luck in your other direction?" The inspector could not restrain the gentle dig and Bridie smiled affectionately at the instrument.

"I'm keeping an eye on the lad," he said comfortably. "He's stayin' away from the hoose and amusin' himself, but we'll let him bide for an hour or two. He's costing the country a mint in shoe leather but it can't be helped." With which cryptic announcement he hung up.

Meanwhile in another room in the same building a charge sergeant was being

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

severe over the telephone.

"I can't help who you are, sir," he was saying, "but you've been on the chief twice today already and unless you have some new information, in which case you can report it to me first, I can't put you through to him again. Everything is being done, you can rest assured of that."

"That's all very well, but is it?" Godolphin did not sound amused. "It's over a fortnight now, you know, and the inquest will be resumed in less than six days."

"We know that, sir. We're working on the case." The sergeant listened attentively and sighed as he heard the explorer hang up. "He thinks he's doing his duty, you know," he remarked tolerantly to the constable who leant against the desk.

At three in the afternoon Miss Frances Ivory very hurriedly, and with a palpably fictitious explanation ready on her lips, rang up the studio flat in St. John's Wood which Pendlebury, the R.A., had let to David Field for the winter. She stood listening to the bell ringing and ringing in the empty room for a long time after she realised that had anyone been there he must have answered it, and she returned to the deserted drawing room, mingled irritation and relief tempering the breathless feeling of despair which had brought her to much weakness.

A little later in the day, when Phillida was with her doctor, when Frances was still hovering near the telephone, when Bridie was reading the second report of the day on David Field's itinerary, when Miss Dorset was burning a basketful of scurrilous filth in the basement furnace at the gallery, when Godolphin was preparing his third list of questions for Norris to answer and when Henry Lucar, his red hair blazing above his pallid face, was riding in a London-bound train with Sergeants Randall and Betts in attendance, a very queer conversation passed over the wires between one small house in Tooting and another on the far side of London in Cricklewood.

"I saw her, Mum," said a young voice in Tooting.

"What did she say?" The older voice in Cricklewood was nervous.

"She said she couldn't. She knew you was right but she couldn't. She can't leave her lady since she's so old. She might die without her, she said."

"I dare say she would, but that can't be helped when there's one's self to think of. I do think she might think of her relations and what people say. Did you tell her it wasn't very nice for her own sister, living a respectable life, to be pointed out as a person connected with the murder? Did you tell her that?"

"I told her, Mum."

"And still she said she couldn't leave?"

"That's what she said."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Did you tell her Dad and I would have her here if we had to?"

"Yes, Mum, I told her, but she wouldn't come."

"She is aggravating. She always was. Obstinate as a pig."

There was a pause and then the same voice went on again, lowered this time.

"Did she say anything about it?"

"No, nothing, except that she didn't know 'oo'd done it."

"Oh." The old voice was disappointed. "Dad feels we ought to hear as soon as anybody."

"Yes." The younger voice sounded preoccupied and presently became impulsive. "Mum? I say, I think she's mixed up in it."

"Oh. Oh, my God. Never let your father hear that. What did she say? She didn't say she'd done it?"

"No, of course not. She didn't say nothing reely. I only felt she knew something. She knows something and isn't saying. I come away . . ."

The last relevant telephone call of the day was put through at six-thirty in the evening. David Field rang 38 Sallet Square. Frances answered him and was so relieved to hear him at last that her own voice betrayed her.

"Hello, Duchess, is that you?" He sounded irritatingly normal. "How are you?"

"All right."

"Are you? Is that the truth or are you being the gallant little woman?"

"I'm being gallant."

He laughed with spontaneous pleasure.

"Are you, darling? I bet you are. Will you come out and eat with me tonight? Yes, I know, but wait a moment. I particularly want you to come, and I'll choose a place where the chances are that we shan't meet anyone who has ever seen us before."

"I don't want to come," she said, adding casually, "can't you take somebody else?"

"Of course I can. I rather thought we ought to meet, though. I haven't been round for a day or so, and a gossip writer phoned me this morning to ask if our engagement was still on."

"Oh. What did you say?"

"Me? I was very upstage. Wasn't that right? I said indeed it was and if I read anything to the contrary in his perishing column I should be happy to sue him or kick his seat for him, whichever he preferred. Put on a nice blue dress and I'll fetch you at seven-thirty."

"Gabrielle says we're all to wear black for a month."

"Does she indeed? I say, I like her. Old Grandmamma Intestinal Fortitude, isn't she? Have you got a mourning dance garment?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes."

"Fine. Seven-thirty then. Hold your head up. By the way, I shall come in a humble cab. No Daimlers."

"Why haven't you been round?"

"Oh, funk, you know," he said and rang off, leaving her wondering.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE MARBLE HALL was a large comfortable night club and restaurant, designed for those wary birds, the intelligentsia of the smart set, and had actually succeeded in capturing a great many of them. It was outrageously expensive, comparatively exclusive, and it was also, as somebody said of it on the opening night, pleasant without being in any way good. The *décor* was slavishly of the nineties, and one of its great features was the row of little ornamental boxes built in round the unusually narrow balcony where diners could indulge in a little ostentatious discretion. The looped red curtains drawn well back contrived to defeat their avowed object by calling attention to those who sat framed in them, so everyone was content and the original joke preserved.

The ground-floor tables, huddled round the tiny dancing ring, were crowded when Frances came in with David, but one was reserved for them, and they sat down in the shadow of a ridiculous palm.

He watched her for a minute or two, his eyes narrowed professionally.

"All Degas," he said. "Lovely. I like the dress. It's just right in this studied pretentiousness. Don't look round like a hunted fawn or something. That's carrying the jest too far. Don't worry. There's not a soul in this room who can spare a second to recognise anyone but themselves. That's the strength of this age. Individualism."

It was always like this, she reflected. She met him in a painful overwrought state of nerves, suspicion and self-consciousness, and in five minutes he soothed and bullied her into easy friendliness with a gentle if far too experienced hand. He had turned from her and was looking up at the boxes with interest, so that she had plenty of time to see that he was thinner and to notice the underlying nervous strength which kept his manner so light and controlled. He was an odd person.

They had barely finished the meal when the message came. David took the note from the waiter's tray, and the corners of his wide mouth turned down as he read it.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Spotted," he remarked. "Come on, lady. This is where you hold my hand."

"What is it? What's happened?"

"Hey . . ." He paused in the act of rising to peer at her. "Keep your hands on the wheel. I didn't know you were going like this. It's all right. We're only going to see Uncle Adolphus having a sleuth's night out."

He took her by the elbow, and they followed the waiter up the grand staircase and down the narrow mirror-lined corridor behind the dining booths. The man knocked and held a door open for them.

Their first impression was of mellowness and candlelight. The curtains had been partially drawn, and the small dining table set far back in the box. Their principal emotion, however, was frank old-fashioned consternation. "Dolly" Godolphin, looking very spruce and self-important, had risen to greet them, but opposite him, sitting well back and dressed in a dark frock, but nevertheless there in public not ten days after the disaster, was Phillida herself. David looked from one to the other of them. He was white and his jaw had set.

"You *blithering* fools," he said, the old-fashioned expletive giving the remark an emphasis which no stronger word could have done.

"Not at all." Godolphin was brisk and even cheerful. "Sit down, will you? We've something to put to you. We were just discussing it when I happened to see you. Very queer you should have decided to come to just this one restaurant, isn't it?"

"I don't think it is. I probably came here for the same reason as you did. It's not overcrowded with our particular set. I'm sorry to speak crudely to you two, but upon my Sam I think you're both mad."

"Sit down." Godolphin placed a chair for Frances next to Phillida. The definite artificiality in his manner was very noticeable, and it suddenly occurred to her that he was behaving like the amateur detective in a play. The same idea seemed to have occurred to David for he looked at him blankly.

"This is damned serious," he said at last. "You're out of touch with civilisation still, 'Dolly.' It's not what people think that matters, old boy. I don't believe that any more than you do. It's what the police may take it into their heads to consider. They've followed you both here, you know. They're bound to have. They've had a man tailing me from the beginning."

Godolphin cast an eloquent glance at Phillida and resumed his seat.

"A cigarette?" he suggested.

Frances could have screamed at him. He had come back into the midst of their tragedy and was using it to gratify some idiotic theatrical sense of his own. She glanced at her half sister to see how she was taking it and was sidetracked by something else.

Phillida was wearing the chiffon which she had thrown so carelessly on one

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

side on the night before the funeral. The smoky drapery mingled with the shadows and was hidden, but on her corsage glittered an enormous spray of diamonds. Frances gaped at it. Phillida had a good many jewels, but a staggering effort of this sort was not a thing one brought out lightly from a drawer in the dressing table or even from a safe in the wall. It seemed incredible that she should never have seen it before.

David followed her eyes.

"That's rather sensational," he said, leaning forward. "Is it new?"

Phillida did not speak but indicated Godolphin helplessly.

David sat back. "Yes, well, you *are* nuts," he said. "You'll get the girl arrested, 'Dolly.' Look here, this isn't funny any more. I know you and I, and Phillida too, for that matter, all belong to the gang who grew up just after the war and found the place in such a mess that everything had to be a roaring joke, but times have changed. We're old. We're grown up. You can't go assing along like this as though we were still back in the nineteen twenties. It's disgusting as well as being dangerous."

Godolphin cleared his throat deliberately. He was still smiling faintly.

"I was going to talk to you tomorrow," he said, "but we can have it out here better than anywhere else. Frances ought to be in it too. I've been going into this thing very thoroughly. I warned you that I should, and I've come to some very interesting conclusions. Now listen to me, Field. This is straight. You can be absolutely frank with us. We're none of us against you. There's nothing we won't do for you, but we must have the thing settled. Did you kill Robert?"

David sat perfectly still, looking at them. They could see his face had grown hard and his round dark eyes hot with some emotion which was not defined.

"My dear chap," he said at last.

"That's not an answer."

David rose. Godolphin's stick lay against his chair and he indicated it.

"When you're fit enough to do without that I'll be happy to oblige you," he said briefly. "I take it you're asking for horseplay?"

"Still you haven't answered me."

David appealed to Phillida. "Has he been like this all the evening?" he began, but paused as he caught a glimpse of her face. His colour changed and he shot a swift enquiring glance at Frances which took her off her guard. For a moment he stood looking at her and his mouth twisted before he laughed. "Dear me," he said flippantly. "Life is full of little surprises. No, 'Dolly,' I did not kill him."

"Yet you were the last person who could possibly have been with him. You came out of the garden room and told Frances that he was going for a walk.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

That's common knowledge."

Godolphin's prosecuting-counsel manner was growing, and he was sprawling across the table in his eagerness.

"I did. I thought he was going out. Damn it, I'd fetched his coat and hat from the hall for him." The admission escaped him before he was aware, and he broke off abruptly before Godolphin's sharp intake of breath.

"Why?"

"Because he asked me to."

"Do you honestly expect anyone to believe that?"

"No. That's why I didn't mention it before. But that's what happened."

Godolphin slid back into his chair.

"Wouldn't it be easier?" he said gently. "After all, we're all on your side. We all know what Robert was and we all know you're inclined to lose your head when you lose your temper. Give us a chance to get behind you."

David leant back against the door of the box. He looked very tall in his dinner jacket. His hands were in his pockets and his head was bent.

"Why?" he said at last. "Why on God's earth *should* I have killed the chap? I admit I was having a few words with the man about my marrying Frances, but he couldn't put his foot down one way or the other. He wasn't Meyrick, and anyway the child's free, white and twenty-one."

Godolphin glanced at Phillida again as if to make sure that she was an appreciative audience.

"David," he said, "supposing you were having this backchat with Robert alone down there in the garden room, with the house quiet and the fire low, and suppose Robert said something that got under your skin. Suppose you suddenly saw his grey lock flapping in his eyes and you felt what a damned silly pompous ass he was, and you suddenly let him have it. Suppose you told him."

He broke off and they stared at David. He was white. The old friendliness had been wiped off his face as though with a sponge. Godolphin went on.

"Suppose you told him about his own wife. You knew, remember. You were the only guest at that wedding. And then, when you realised what you'd done and saw how he was going to take it, and realised that Phillida was going to be brought into it and that your marriage with Frances would be mucked up hopelessly, suppose that then you lost your head . . . as you do, you know . . . and you killed him."

"With a toothpick, I suppose?"

Godolphin shrugged his shoulders.

"There used to be an old spike file in that desk in there, so Norris says. He can't remember when it disappeared. Whatever it was, you had a week to get rid of it."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

David shifted his weight from the door.

"Imaginative little beggar, aren't you?" he said, but for once his lightness did not ring true and his face was still grey.

"If you'll be reasonable I'll back you to the limit."

"David, for God's sake!" Phillida was scarcely audible.

The painter ignored them both. He looked at Frances.

"Coming?" he enquired.

She rose at once and went over to him.

They went out of the restaurant together in silence. The only cab available was an old one, a dreadful springless vehicle smelling like the inside of an old-clothes trunk. Frances sat bleakly in a corner of it as they jolted over the broad roads, greasy with light rain.

They were in a traffic jam at the end of Bond Street when at last he spoke in a brittle, contemptuous tone which she had not heard before.

"And what do you think after all that?"

"I don't."

"Don't what? Think I'm guilty or think at all?"

Frances closed her eyes and her voice was dreary.

"I don't think anything except that I love you," she said.

He said nothing at all, and she sat there wretchedly, feeling that she had finished it, pulled the last sound spar out of the whole tottering structure of life and peace of mind. Now David was gone and that was that.

A movement at her side attracted her and she turned to find him looking at her, a fixed and horrified expression on his face.

"That's a blow below the belt, Duchess," he said. "Do you mean it?"

"Yes," she said doggedly. "I don't even care if you killed Robert. I don't care if you've had a dozen mistresses and learned how to be so nice to women by falling in love with all of them. I'm not interested. I don't mind. I'm past that."

"Darling, this is bloody dangerous." He put his arm round her and she was surprised to find it shaking. "Don't go and do this," he said, his lips touching her ear. "Don't, please, sweet. You don't know anything about it. It's all right for me, you see, but not for you. You're so new."

"Do you love me?"

He bent his head until his forehead rested on her cheek.

"For my sins," he said.

After a while he drew away from her, kissing her very lightly as he raised his head and pushing her firmly away from him. He found her hand, however, and held it so tightly that he hurt her, kneading it between his own.

"I hit him," he said. "That's what happened. Lucar was there to begin with, and there was an idiotic scene in which I became insufferably upstage and re-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fused to discuss you in front of him, and he got cheeky and Robert wouldn't or couldn't shut him up. Finally I became all theatrical and kicked the little blighter out. You heard 'Dolly' getting at me this evening over my notorious temper? That was a dig at me because I once had a row with Gabrielle down in the game room at 38. It was over Phillida, the time when she was stringing me along and running a serious affair with somebody else. This was years ago, about the time I painted your portrait. I was very much the penniless artist in those days, and Gabrielle said a few rather painful things about young men who wanted to marry money. I had an Indian club, of all things, in my hand, I remember, and there was quite a setout. I got away without doing any damage but everyone knew, or thought they knew, that I might have done some, and anyhow it all looked very bad. This affair the other night was the same sort of thing. I pitched Lucar into the passage and he went off like a streak. That was when you met him, wasn't it? It was some little time before I came up. Tenish."

"Yes," she said huskily. "That was the time. Just after ten. He looked furious."

"Not so much as I did. Robert was livid himself, unfortunately. That was how it happened. He was still standing on the hearthrug, shaking with fury, and he said something quite unpardonable, and I hit him. I hit him very hard. In fact I barked my knuckles on his chin and cut his face badly for him. He went down like a tree, with his head on the parquet. I think I put him out for a minute or two for he lay there goggling at me and I stood looking at him for a tremendous time."

"I know. I saw you."

"Did you? Where from? The yard?"

"Yes."

"Hadn't I pulled the blind down then? No? That must have been afterwards. Yes, it was, of course. I drew the blind after I'd got him into the chair and seen the mess his face was in."

He was silent for a moment or so and she heard him laugh awkwardly in the darkness.

"Such a silly, kiddish story. I was ordinarily and unintellectually angry and I remained truculent. It didn't pass. But I did have the sense to realise that I'd put up an idiotic show by marking him, and my first anxiety was to get him clean and tidy, so that his version of the story wouldn't sound too bad for anything. He was pretty worried about himself too. He kept saying, 'What will the servants think?' like a parrot, until I nearly hit him again. Finally I went out and got his hat and coat for him and told him to get into them while I went up to say good night to you. My idea was to cart him down to a doctor and get him patched up. We were going to use the yard door so that he shouldn't run the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

risk of meeting anyone in the hall. Well, all that was all right as far as it went, but when I came down again I heard him talking inside the room. I assumed that Lucar had returned so I didn't go in. I went back down the passage, got my own coat from the cloak-room where I had left it, like an ass, when I fetched his, and let myself out. When he didn't show up in the morning I took it for granted that he was hiding somewhere, getting his face presentable."

"Why didn't you tell the police all this?"

He laughed and released her hand.

"It wouldn't have been a good idea, ducky, would it?" he said. "Lucar had brought the entire boiling down on his own head, anyway, by clearing out."

"You weren't trying to shield Lucar?"

"No, naturally not. But I saw no point in going into a long story."

"In fact you were shielding me?"

He leant over and put his hands one on each side of her on the wall of the cab.

"Oh, my God, Duchess," he said heavily, "if you make a hero of me you're going to come such a howling cropper."

"I don't think I care very much about that."

He kissed her gently, almost shyly.

"I don't believe you do. Heaven help us both," he said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE DETECTIVE was sitting stolidly in the hall waiting for them as they came up the steps. He was apologetic. Divisional Detective Inspector Bridie, he assured them, was more than sorry to have to ask Miss Ivory to come out again at this time of night, but if she would come down to headquarters for a minute or two he would be eternally grateful.

David went with them as a matter of course, and the plain-clothes man made no objection. It had begun to rain heavily again when they stumbled out across the slippery pavement, up a worn flight of steps, and crossed under the blue light into a narrow corridor neatly decorated in government green. They went up uncarpeted stairs to a waiting room. There was a young constable standing by the door, and behind him, seated at the table and looking as if she was going to drop with fatigue, was Miss Dorset, of all people.

Their escort cut short any mutual greetings with a hurried apology.

"It sounds funny, I know, but I wonder if you'd mind, miss? No talking," he said. "It won't be for long. It's only regulations."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He nodded to the constable, who went off at once, leaving them all looking at one another awkwardly. Frances was openly nervous.

They waited for a full minute before the clatter on the boards outside announced the return of the constable. He came in ponderously, and his young eyes rested on her with open boyish admiration.

"This way, Miss," he said, beaming. "The inspector was sorry to keep you waiting."

She left David without a glance and went with him, and afterwards, when she thought of it again, it seemed symbolic.

Bridie was sitting behind his desk, a pair of steel spectacles on the tip of his nose and no trace of weariness in his bearing. He rose when she came in and set a chair for her himself, waving the constable out of the room as he did so.

"This is a fine time to ask ye to come and see me. Did ye think ye were coming to chail?" he said cheerfully. A movement behind her made her glance round to discover a helmetless constable seated at a small desk, who was regarding her with unsmiling interest. "Ye don't want to notice him," said Bridie with terrific jocularity. "The poor chap cholly well has to sit there to take down any chewelery that may drop from ma lips."

He laughed at his own attempt at a witticism, and his eyes were human and pleased.

"Now," he said, resettling himself, "I won't keep ye long. Would you chust repeat exactly what ye did on the night your poor dead brother-in-law . . . pardon me, half brother-in-law . . . was last seen alive?"

His friendliness, which amounted almost to gaiety, was not in the least disarming. Frances felt her scalp begin to prickle, and breathing was absurdly difficult.

"I was talking to Phillida," she said cautiously, trying to remember every word of her previous statement.

"At what time?"

"I don't know exactly. I went up at about half-past nine, I think. I'd heard the nine o'clock news on the radio. And then David arrived and he and Robert had gone into the garden room. Robert told me not to go with them, so I went up to Phillida. I stayed with her for some little time, about another half-hour, and then I went down stairs again as I've told you."

"So ye have, and told it well," he assured her happily. "But I'd just like it once more. Half an hoor . . . That makes it tenish."

Tenish. David had used that ugly little word. She hesitated uncertainly. There was danger about. The smell of it was in the very air and yet she could not place it. Bridie was beaming and avuncular, and she took the plunge. After all, it was the truth. Surely there could be no harm in sticking to that?

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes," she said. "Just about ten. I passed Mr Lucar in the hall and I went on down to the yard, as I said."

"Wait a minute. Ye're sure ye passed Mr Lucar at that time?"

"Yes. Perfectly sure."

"Ah," said Bridie, and the constable took another note.

"Then ye went down to the yar-rd and what did ye see?"

This was the danger point. This was the lie. She saw the real scene clearly in her mind: David alone, looking down. Robert must have been lying on the floor then, the mark on his jaw slowly puffing up. She remembered the exact words she had used before and repeated them.

"I saw David and Robert talking."

"Talking," said Bridie. "Ah well, Mr Lucar will be pleased. He can sleep in his own house tonight."

He was watching her, peering out at her from under his heavy lids, and she suddenly saw the pitfall.

"Is Mr Lucar here?"

"Chust in there," he said, jerking his grey head towards an inner door. "He's a lucky man. For-rtunately for him there was a good conscientious woman working uncommonly late in the picture gallery that night, and she can tell how he came in for his hat and coat at ten o'clock and how they walked down to the tube together and took a train. His servant swears for him that night, and we've tr-raced his movements ever after that night ourselves. The woman gives him a grand alibi."

"Miss Dorset?"

"That's she. She's a great pairson. An honest, sensible conscientious woman, isn't she?"

"Oh yes," she said absently, "yes, she's all right. She's absolutely cast iron. If she says it, it is so. It is so," she repeated, facing the result of her little lie. David and Robert talking. David and Robert. Robert seen alive with David after Lucar was safely out of the house and in Miss Dorset's unimpeachable care. Robert never seen again.

She sat up suddenly, and Bridie pounced on her changing expression.

"What's come into your mind?"

"Nothing," she said earnestly. "Nothing."

Yet out of the whirlpool of suggestions, riddles, bewildering details and half-comprehended incidents which engulfed her something had arisen, something which set a whole procession of appalling questions racing through her mind. Since Lucar had not returned to the garden room that night David had lied to her in the taxi when he had said he had heard Robert talking to him through the door.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE SOUND OF the latch slipping home in the darkness woke Frances to full consciousness. She sat up in bed and peered across the room, trying to make out a deeper shadow in the black.

"Frances?"

The whisper started out of the silence like a fire alarm, and she flung out her hand and caught the tassel which turned on the bedside light. The faint pink glow stretched out towards the door, and a figure standing there stepped back against the portiere. It was Phillida.

"What's happened?"

"Nothing else. I want to talk to you."

"Oh, I see. Very well, come over here. What time is it?"

"Nearly four. I had to come. I couldn't stay in my room another minute. Frances, you've got to listen to me."

"All right, of course I'll listen. Don't stand there shivering. Put the quilt round you. What is it?"

Phillida came to the end of the bed but did not sit down.

"It's 'Dolly,' " she said huskily. "If only we could get him to go away."

The younger girl eyed her curiously.

"I thought you seemed to be getting on pretty well with him tonight," she said at last.

"When he accused David? I know. That's what I mean. That's why I'm frightened. Don't you see, he's plunged into this . . . this business as if it were a new expedition or something. He doesn't seem to see that it's real."

Her earnestness was disarming, even at such an hour, and Frances felt deeply sorry for her.

"Have you suggested that he go?"

"I've hinted. I didn't dare to say it outright in case it made him completely obstinate. You don't know him. He's always been like this. That was how that secret marriage happened. He forced it. He talked and bullied and got wildly and insanely enthusiastic until I simply went to pieces and let him fix it. When I saw him come limping in the other day I thought those frightful experiences out there had taken the fire out of him, but they haven't. What shall I do?"

"I don't see what you can do, darling, except bear it," Frances said awkwardly. "He's got all the cards. I mean you can't *turn* him out."

"But Frances, you don't understand." Phillida was still talking in whispers, but she had grown more vehement. "You don't seem to grasp what kind of person he is. He'll go on ferreting at it until he drags the whole horrible mess out into the daylight."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Let him." Frances passed her hands over her face. "I wish to God he would. We can't go on like this all our lives."

"Oh, but *listen*." Phillida dropped on her knees by the bedside and leant across the coverlet. "Frances. I haven't told this to anybody but I'm so frightened that I can't bear it any longer. He hasn't said anything direct, of course, but I can see how his mind works, and from the way he looks at me I've wondered . . . I mean, it's sneaked through my mind . . . that . . . Oh, lord, Frances, do you think he could be so mad as to get it into his head that *I'd* done it?"

"You? My dear girl, no. Of course not. You're off your head. You feel like this because it's nighttime."

"No, it's not that. I'm not hysterical." She was speaking with a deadly seriousness which was convincing. "Don't you see it's not real to him at all? He hasn't got used to civilisation, that's all. He thinks I might have done it."

A note in her voice startled Frances and she sat up.

"Phillida, you're not telling me that . . ."

"That I did? No, I'm not. Of course I'm not." She dragged herself to her feet. "But there you are, you see. Even you're willing to suspect me. Everyone suspects me. The doctor does. Gabrielle does. 'Dolly' does. And you, who know I didn't, even you're beginning to wonder. You fool! You were with me yourself until you went downstairs and saw Robert talking to David. Then on your own showing you heard someone go out and after that you were hanging about the house for a long time. You know I couldn't have done it, could I? Could I?"

Could she? Frances found herself giving the question a consideration both levelheaded and detached. Her own movements on the night of Robert's disappearance were stamped into her mind indelibly. She had come flying up to her own room from the yard and had stayed there until David had put his head in. A certain amount of time had elapsed between those two incidents, so there had been plenty of opportunity for Phillida to slip out of her room, hang about in one of the empty rooms downstairs, and then, when David came up . . .

Her steady train of thought leapt forward. If the person whom David had heard through the garden room talking to Robert had been Phillida, then not only would he not have intruded upon them, but he would never have admitted it afterwards.

Phillida leant down with her hands on the other girl's shoulders. Her face looked young and spoilt in her eagerness.

"Could I?" she repeated. "Say it. Could I?"

It was in that moment of hesitation, when the entire house seemed to be listening as they huddled together in their little pool of rose-coloured light, that the thing happened.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The great brass and iron gong, which Li-Cheng, that prince of dealers, had insisted on presenting to Meyrick on the occasion of his first marriage, and which had stood in decorative opulence in a corner of the hall for thirty-five years, pitched onto the flags with a sound like all the brass instruments of creation hurling down some gigantic ravine. Everybody in the house heard it and knew what it was.

Frances was halfway across the room, with Phillida at her heels, when the screams began. They resounded from somewhere downstairs and came, one after the other, full lunged and lusty, in a steady crescendo.

The landing was a place of fluttering half darkness when they got out there. Doors swung on their hinges and draughts fled past like live things.

"What is it? Oh, what is it? What is it?" someone was repeating shrilly, and Frances was astonished to discover that it was herself.

The reverberations of the first mighty crash still tingled in the air, and as the fifth scream died, after reaching a pitch of abandoned terror, there was a scuffle on the flags downstairs and then, for the second time in her life, Frances heard the sound which should have been so very reassuring and yet was not, the swift purposeful tread of someone marching firmly across the hall.

It was the same. That was the one thing which stood out in her mind, subduing every other thought by its significance. She choked back a cry just in time and only a deep inarticulate sound escaped her.

Phillida clutched her shoulders.

"Who is it?"

She did not answer. There was a rush of cold air and a clatter as the yard door slammed back against the wall and the screaming began again.

"For God's sake keep that blasted woman quiet! He's getting away. Stop him!"

Godolphin's voice, comfortingly human and furious, sounded in the darkness, and they heard his stick grating on the stone as he limped forward.

"Head him off by the front way. Quickly, Norris! After him! I'm following as fast as my damned leg will let me."

"All right, sir, all right." Norris' voice sounded quavery and the front door opened, letting in a blast of damp air. He shouted as he took the stone steps and Godolphin lurched after him.

Another scream, but a halfhearted one, sounded from the drawing-room door, and Frances recognized the voice.

"Mrs Sanderson!" she called, hurrying down the staircase. "Mrs Sanderson, are you hurt? I'm coming, I'm coming."

There was a theatrical gasp as she reached the hall, and a vast damp calico bundle collapsed in her arms.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He's here," whispered the woman. "He's here again. The killer's come back."

Frances supported her.

"Are you hurt?" she repeated.

"No, I'm not hit. He missed me."

"Then what are you screaming for? Turn the lights on." As she said them the words sounded unduly unsympathetic, but they had their effect. Mrs Sanderson drew back, startled and reproachful.

Frances went over to the switch by the service door and found it without difficulty. She stood blinking in the half-light. The gong was just as she had expected to see it. It lay sprawling across its corner, a wreckage of brass dragons and wrought-iron supports, while beside her, her glistening face wearing an expression of injured amazement, was Mrs Sanderson.

Frances glanced past her at the open threshold through which the wind blew so freezingly. Godolphin came in almost immediately. He was wearing a plaid dressing gown, and his yellow cane looked incongruous with it, although he evidently needed it.

"The fool missed him," he said irritably. "I saw him myself, but he streaked round to the back of the square like a rabbit. Damn this leg! I had to give up." He turned to greet Norris, who had come in behind him. "You're out of training. Couldn't you keep up with him?"

"No sir, I couldn't. I saw him but I couldn't catch him."

"Would you know him again?"

"I wouldn't really like to say, sir. I didn't really see his face at all."

"I don't think he got much, anyway," Godolphin said. "We were on to him too soon. Have you looked about? Anything missing?"

Norris' small eyes opened wide.

"I never thought it might be burglary, sir." He sounded relieved at the suggestion.

It was clear that Godolphin had never thought it was anything else, but now that the idea was presented to him he leapt on it.

"Good lord!" he said, "I didn't get a look at him. A man looks so different when he's running. Different height, even." He broke off and shot Frances a long, searching glance. She recognized his thought.

"Did you think it was David?"

The dangerous question rose to her lips and she might have asked it had it not been for Mrs Sanderson. Until now the housekeeper had stood helpless, but now she asserted herself.

"It was the nigger," she exploded. "It was the nigger come back to murder someone else."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You hold your tongue, Mrs S.! The police told you straight to hold your tongue." Norris strode across the stones and thrust his face into her own.

"It was *him*," persisted the woman. "I can see it in your eye. You saw him. It was the nigger again." She opened her mouth, presumably to scream anew, but Norris dealt with her by placing a hand solidly across the lower half of her face.

"She's hysterical," he said, wrestling with the refractory calico bundle with an efficiency which was surprising. "She thought she saw a nigger on the day of the murder, and it's turned her blinking head. The police themselves told her to keep quiet about it. She's *advertising* herself as unbalanced, that's what she's doing. Keep quiet, Mrs S., do."

A masterly jab in the stomach from the housekeeper's elbow silenced him with a squeak, and the good lady emerged from his arms dishevelled and furious.

"You leave me be!" she exploded. "I did see him and the police complimented me on the clear way I told it. I saw him all right, and Molly saw him, and where is she now? Dead in 'er bed very likely. He's been back to take 'is toll."

"Highly improbable." The thin voice from the top of the stairs silenced everybody. The old Gabrielle stood there, dripping with lace shawls and resting on Dorothea's arm. Phillida was a step or two behind her, and together they made a dramatic group.

"Where is the girl?" Gabrielle addressed the house at large and was answered.

"Here, ma'am." A scrubby object, all loose hairs and cheap negligee, wriggled self-consciously out of the drawing-room door and wavered in the centre of the stage.

"How long have you been hiding there?" Gabrielle was in her more omnipotent mood.

"Since we heard the moving about, ma'am."

"When was that?"

"Just before the gong fell over, ma'am."

"My God," said Gabrielle conversationally. "My God, what next? You, Mr Godolphin, what are you doing running about the house dressed up like that?"

Godolphin straightened himself and coloured but he answered pertinently enough.

"I heard the door that leads into the yard open and close and I came down to investigate. On the way I ran into Norris, who had heard the same thing. In the hall here we surprised somebody who made a dash for it and knocked over the gong. Then Mrs Sanderson began to scream, and the fellow, whoever he was, got away."

Gabrielle turned to look at Phillida.

"When I was mistress of this house I had it locked at night," she said acidly. "It saved a lot of inconvenience."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"But the door was locked, ma'am. I did it myself." Norris was almost in tears. "That's why I was so took aback. Whoever came in must have had a second key."

"Impossible." Gabrielle spoke flatly, almost carelessly. "Did anybody see this burglar?"

"We're wondering if it was a burglar, darling." Frances felt her voice was unnecessarily low.

"Are you, my dear? Did anybody see him?"

"Both Norris and I caught a glimpse of the man, Mrs Ivory." Godolphin was recovering his authority. "We just saw him for a moment, that was all."

"And was he a Negro?"

The enquiry, coming from her in all seriousness, was astonishing, and they gaped at her. Godolphin looked at Norris, who seemed bewildered.

"No," he said. "No ma'am. That is, I don't think so. Do you, sir?"

"No, I don't," said Godolphin dubiously.

"Ah," said Gabrielle as if she had established an important point. "And if it wasn't burglary why do you suppose this person came?"

"To fetch the weapon," said Mrs Sanderson, and the simplicity of the statement was impressive. "No one's found the weapon. The police have searched for it high and low but they didn't know where to look. He knew where to look and he's come back for it."

They humoured her, or flattered themselves that they did, while they satisfied their own natural curiosity. All the downstairs rooms save one presented the placid vacant look which daytime chambers always have when startled into life in the middle of the night. The last room they searched was the garden room, and there the change was slight but very disturbing in the circumstances. A chair had been drawn up to the table, while behind it the door of the cupboard, which had been closed ever since the last police expert had examined it, hung swinging open.

Godolphin, who had led the exploring party, stepped back abruptly, and Phillida caught her breath audibly. Mrs Sanderson thrust her way through the group and stood looking at the ordinary and yet in the circumstances singularly sinister scene.

"There you are," she said. "What did I say? It was the murderer. He's been back for the weapon, and you know what that means. . . . He's going to use it again."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IN THE MORNING, when the police had been informed and were still wandering round the house, when David had called to see Gabrielle and had spent an hour with her, and when Godolphin had disorganised the normal domestic routine by taking every servant in the house over and over every incident in the night's adventure, Lucar delivered his invitation.

There is something about real impudence which is a force in itself, and the terse notes which arrived from him for every member of the family, stating that he would be glad if they would give him their attention for half an hour at three o'clock in Meyrick's office at the gallery, had the quality of an ultimatum.

To their own and each other's astonishment they went meekly. It was an extraordinary gathering. Everyone was quiet and everyone was angry. As Frances looked round her and saw Phillida, waxy and hollow eyed, sitting sullen in her furs, Godolphin trembling with suppressed irritation and fidgeting with his stick as if he would like to use it, David aloof and for once completely removed from her, Miss Dorset red eyed and shocked into outraged silence, and Lucar odiously pleased with himself behind Meyrick's second desk, the fact which had been scratching at the back of her mind for the past week came home to her abruptly. No one really trusted anyone else any more. Each person in that unhappy group had at one time or another during the last few days secretly suspected each of the rest in turn of the one crime which is never forgiven in a civilised community.

Lucar looked round with a brief smile.

"I don't see the old lady yet," he said. "We want her."

They gaped at him and he enjoyed their astonishment.

"She'll come," he remarked.

David stirred. "What are you going to do, Lucar? Confess?"

The drawling question was intentionally offensive, and they had the satisfaction of seeing the man redden.

"That would suit you, wouldn't it?" he said. "You've been watching me, Mr Godolphin. Placed me yet?"

The sarcasm seemed to be lost on Godolphin.

"Yes," he said. "You were Robert Madrigal's batman. An inefficient servant."

Frances got up. "This is silly," she said, her voice sounding unexpectedly authoritative in the electric silence. "What do you want to say, Mr Lucar? You've asked us to meet you and here we are. Do say what you've got to say, for heaven's sake."

Lucar turned to her. "That's not quite the line to take with me," he began.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"My proud beauty," supplemented David under his breath.

Lucar swung towards him savagely.

"That'll do from you. That'll do from the lot of you. I've got you and you know it, but I'm going to put the position to you so clearly that you can't make any mistake. I'm only waiting for Mrs Ivory."

"In that case we may as well go home." Frances spoke wearily. "Is Granny likely to come all the way up here just because you've asked her to? Can't you see it's a miracle we've come ourselves? It seems to me that you're so pleased that you're not arrested that it's turned your head. Of course Granny won't come to you. It's cheek of you to ask her, appalling cheek."

She paused. Lucar was smirking and David came over to her.

"Hold it, Duchess," he murmured and pulled her round to face the door.

Gabrielle was making an entrance. On her way down the passage she had been leaning on Dorothea's arm, but now she came forward alone. She was in full mourning, made almost bulky by a fox cape hanging to her knees and surmounted, most unexpectedly, but very charmingly, by an old-fashioned widow's cap with a starched and goffered lining and a long dark veil hanging down behind. Her natural dignity saved the situation, and even in the midst of his triumph Lucar evidently felt that she had somehow scored over him.

She sat down and Dorothea planted herself at her elbow.

It was at this point that the wind rose again or, to be exact, that the little company first noticed it. The long brocade curtains behind Lucar billowed out as a great gust came rushing through the narrow slit at the top of the tall window.

It was typical of the afternoon that this trivial incident should have impressed itself so vividly upon their minds, and to the end of her days Frances was to feel a twinge of apprehension whenever a curtain should swing out suddenly in the rising wind.

It was Godolphin who opened the ball, sitting forward on his hard chair, his folded hands resting on the crook of his stick.

"Now," he said, "now, my man, perhaps you'll explain yourself. What the devil did you mean by cutting and running the moment poor Madrigal was found dead? Didn't you realise you'd have the police after you like a pack of hounds?"

Lucar looked up from the desk where he sat in Meyrick's chair, drawing circles with Meyrick's pen on Meyrick's blotter. He was glistening with conceit.

"Not very politely asked," he said primly, "but I'll answer you. I went before I knew he was dead. The police saw that at once when I pointed it out to them. On the night before the discovery I happened to hear that a certain collector in London was interested in the Gaylord Venus. That information came into

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

this office, and I saw an opportunity of doing myself a bit of good. Madrigal was out of the way. I couldn't find him to ask his opinion even if I wanted to. So I slept the night on it and decided to take the affair into my own hands. I went down to the bank and drew out all the cash I had and nipped on a boat for New York. I reckoned that if anyone could make Damon Penryth of Philadelphia sell that picture it was little Henry. In mid-ocean the news about Madrigal came through on the radio. I put two and two together and decided to come back. I sent a wire to the police at once, and they met me off the boat. We soon understood one another. I was all right. I knew that all along."

"That was why you came back, of course?"

Lucar lowered one thick white eyelid.

"Partly," he said.

"I don't see why you had to take your own money, Mr Lucar." The observation was forced out of Miss Dorset by sheer indignation. "That was ordinary routine intelligence and our property."

"Never mind." Gabrielle's distaste was a Victorian tour de force. "I imagine that Mr Lucar . . . is it . . . did not ask us here to discuss a piece of very ordinary business chicanery on his part. What have you got to tell us, Mr Lucar, that you feel we might find interesting?" She was quite insufferable and meant to be.

Lucar appeared to be enjoying himself.

"Well, you know," he said softly, "I thought we all ought to have a little chat. You see, I've got my position to think of. The guv'nor's coming back, isn't he? And I may decide to stay with the firm."

They watched him blankly. After all, as Gabrielle remarked afterwards, there is nothing actually unbelievable about mass blackmail, but it is so very unconventional that it startles one.

"I don't think we understand you, Lucar."

It was David, sounding dangerously quiet.

"That's a pity, Field." Lucar shot the words out with unexpected savagery. "I rather hoped you would . . . you particularly. You're in a jam, aren't you? All of you. While I was out of the country there was always a chance, from the point of view of the people who didn't know, that I was the person the police were after. However, now I'm back, now I've had my little talk with the police and they've shown that they're not interested in me, all that's altered. Now do you see where I'm leading?"

Nobody answered him, and his smile grew more pronounced.

"You're leaving me to do all the talking, aren't you?" he said. "I don't care. If you want it put in words you can have it. It's all the same to me. My freedom puts a rope round you. Don't you kid yourselves it isn't there. Don't you im-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

agine the police are going to sleep. There's a lot of work being done on the quiet. A lot of little odds and ends of information are finding their way onto the superintendent's desk. But so far they haven't had all my contribution."

"You're suggesting that we don't want the police to find Robert's murderer," said Frances abruptly.

He turned towards her.

"One of you doesn't," he said, "and none of you *will*."

"What the hell are you saying?" Godolphin rose painfully to his feet. "We've listened to quite enough of this," he said. "This is the kind of thing one might have expected from you, Lucar. You were a snivelling little nuisance on the last occasion I had anything to do with you. When I went off to do my damned silly heroics I looked down at you sleeping by Madrigal's feet and I thought then it was a wasted effort."

The force of his contempt was tremendous, and they glanced at him slyly out of the corners of their eyes. Great heroism, like great cowardice, is shy-making, and they were all embarrassed when he mentioned the story which had made headlines when Robert Madrigal had returned to civilisation to tell it.

Lucar met Godolphin's eyes for a moment and flushed as he looked away.

"All right, say what you like," he said doggedly. "I've never cared what anyone said or thought about me and that's how I've got where I am. One of you here killed Madrigal. If that's not clear to you, believe me it is to the rest of the world. In your hearts you know it. That's why you're here. Well, now you know where you stand. So far I'm not telling any more of what I know than is necessary to clear myself, and if everything goes on as I intend it shall I shan't feel called upon to say any more. I thought I'd tell you all and I'd tell you all together, so no one makes any mistakes."

Godolphin limped to the desk and picked up the telephone.

"Put me on to the police," he said briefly into the instrument.

Lucar leant forward and laid a finger on the stand, destroying the connection.

"Wait," he said. "Let the others have a say. There are enough witnesses here to make the police give me a gruelling, but does everybody here *want* me to talk?"

There was a freezing silence. Godolphin stood with the instrument still raised, and Lucar kept his finger on the stand.

"Well," he said, "now's your opportunity."

"No." It was Gabrielle. "Sit down, Mr Godolphin. When the time comes we will call the police."

There were at least three sighs in the room, and a splatter of rain swept the window in that long moment wherein Godolphin replaced the telephone and Lucar smiled again.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Someone's seen the light," he said and nodded to Gabrielle as no one had ever nodded to her in nearly ninety years.

"It's bluff," said David, clearing his throat. "Pure bluff. There's no earthly reason why the thing shouldn't have been done from outside."

"Isn't there?" Lucar's mouth twisted with grim amusement. "Isn't there any reason why whoever killed Madrigal could disappear quietly out of that dark house over there when the first person who goes in without knowing the place raises half the servants and kicks over a gong the moment he sets foot in it?"

Frances received a mental thump between the shoulder blades. That was the unformed question which had been worrying her from the beginning. Those quick, firm footsteps marching so surely across the hall, once last night and once on that other night nearly a fortnight before; they had sounded in the dark. They had crossed the dark hall where the gong stood and where there might have been a dozen other obstacles. Whoever owned those footsteps had been peculiarly sure of the ground.

She caught sight of Gabrielle and Dorothea. The two old women were regarding the redheaded man behind the desk as if he were an apparition. They knew the house, of course. For thirty years they had known every inch of it. But that idea was so preposterous that Frances smiled and did not see David glance so nervously at Phillida.

Lucar seemed satisfied with the impression he was making. He leant back in Meyrick's chair and crossed his plump legs.

"The police seem to be taking a lot of interest in a nigger some scivvy thought she saw," he remarked. "I'm much more interested in certain other little things . . . the music-hall song, for instance."

He regarded their stony faces with growing satisfaction.

"No one really amused?" he said. "That's a funny thing. It's a famous old song. 'No one's going to kiss that girl but me.' You know how it goes. 'Pride of Idaho, So now you know If you go You'll find there's something on her mind Don't think it's you, Cause no one's going to kiss that girl but me.' Don't you get it, anybody? Let me whistle it to you."

He pursed his lips, and the catchy tune sounded shrill and clear in the crowded room. It was not quite an errand boy's version; nor was it strictly correct. There was an individuality about it and an element of great weariness.

"Oh, my God," said Miss Dorset, her voice thick and deep in her throat. "The whistle on the telephone."

"Was that it?" Phillida and Gabrielle spoke together and both broke off in the same way as if they had said too much.

"What's this? I haven't been told about this." Godolphin turned towards

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

them eagerly, all his anger evaporating before his interest in the new clue.

"You recognise it, do you?" Lucar was watching Miss Dorset with his head on one side.

"Yes, I heard it . . . once." The woman spoke dully. She was frightened. "It was about eight months . . . ten . . . no, nearly a year ago. A call came through for Mr Madrigal here at the office. I didn't recognise the voice. It was foreign and sort of constrained. Something about it made me curious, and I listened for a moment or two. That was all I heard, just the tune whistled like that. Then Mr Madrigal hung up. He went out at once and didn't come back all day."

She paused.

"I never saw him quite the same after that," she added presently.

Godolphin was looking at her as if he thought she was gibbering.

"That doesn't sound like you," he said. "I mean that's a fantastic story. It's melodrama. It sounds like the fakir's curse. Pull yourself together. What really happened?"

"It's true." Phillida was sitting bolt upright, two spots of colour burning in her cheeks. "It often happened, or at least he thought it did. It became an obsession with him. He used to dream about it. That's what frightened me so. I thought he was out of his mind. That day after — after we found him I told Gabrielle up in the bedroom and she thought I was mad. Now Miss Dorset's telling you, and you're looking at her as if she . . ."

The words died, and a trickle of laughter escaped her, growing in volume and rising high and uncontrolled. Gabrielle moved with surprising agility.

"Quick," she said, "quick, somebody."

It was Frances who reached her first and who shook the hysteria out of her.

"All right," said Godolphin when the excitement had died a little. "All right, all right. There's no need to go off the deep end about it, Phillida. If you all say it did happen I'll accept it. I knew Robert pretty well, though, and I can't say I see him as a nervous wreck. Are you sure he wasn't pulling your leg?"

"Oh, no, you're on the wrong tack there entirely. Robert had changed. Last time I saw him that's exactly how I should have described him, a nervous wreck."

David made the statement quietly, almost casually, and his expression did not change before Godolphin's incredulous stare.

"Amazing," said Godolphin. "How often did this occur? Once a month? Once a week?"

"Pretty regularly at the finish, wasn't it?" Lucar put the question to the woman slyly, as if they shared a confidence. "It began about a year ago, and it's been happening at irregular intervals ever since, hasn't it, Mrs Madrigal?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Phillida covered her face with her hands.

"Yes, I think so." Her voice was smothered. "He was getting more and more on edge all the time. It was only since the summer that he began to talk so wildly about it, and I began to think he was insane."

"There's nothing insane about it if Miss Dorset heard it too," Godolphin declared practically.

"Exactly. That's my point," Lucar's tone was quiet, but it brought them all round facing him again. "Well, there you are," he said. "That's all I'm telling at the moment, but I've got a hunch it's going to be enough. Now I won't detain you. I dare say you'll all feel like a little discussion without me. I'm sorry I can't offer you this room but I'm going to be busy. However, the rest of the mausoleum is at your disposal. Miss Dorset, I'll have a cup of tea in here at four-fifteen."

It was the final insult, the last twist of the screw, and he looked round him eagerly to see if his hold was secure.

On the other side of the room Frances also looked about her. She was waiting for the outcry, the single annihilating stroke which would send him back where he belonged. It did not come. They were going to stomach it. The realisation came to her with a sense of dismay. It was unbelievable but also obvious. Gabrielle had lain a restraining hand on Godolphin's sleeve, and the rest were silent and expressionless.

They went, leaving Lucar in his triumph, and trooped into the antique room. It was deserted, and there was an awkward pause as Gabrielle, who had headed the procession of defeat, leaning on Dorothea for support, paused and faced her flock.

"I shall sit here," she announced. "Tell them to keep the public out of here. This gallery is closed."

"Darling, do you think you ought to?" It was not like Phillida to be solicitous, but she sounded sincere. "You ought to go to bed after all that. I shall myself. I can't stand it. I can't stand it any longer."

Gabrielle beckoned Godolphin.

"Take her home," she said. "All of you go out of here. Do you mind? I want to be alone except for Dorothea. I am old, too old. I want to sit here and rest and make up my mind."

The rest of them moved out onto the staircase and stood about in two little groups, whispering. David paused by Frances.

"I'm going back to the studio," he said abruptly. "I've got some work."

"To work?" It was an unexpected announcement at such a time and she echoed him.

He nodded. "Yes. I've got a drawing, a portrait, I must finish. I'll see you

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

soon. Stay in for me this evening. I'll ring you."

She said nothing and he laughed and, taking one of her hands, squeezed it violently before he turned away and hurried off down the stairs, leaving her looking after him.

Frances moved to the long landing window and knelt on the low sill, to look down into the square and see him go. It was nearly dusk and the lamps were yellow in the blue haze. There was no sign of David, and she took it that she had missed him. All the same she did not move. The familiar scene outside was peaceful and normal at a moment when ordinary reflection was impossible. At that time her mind was a confused dumping ground of fears and impressions, and she was grateful for a moment's respite.

She did not notice the others go, nor did she see the various employees who passed her. She remained staring out of the window for nearly twenty minutes, simply kneeling upon the sill, contemplating the traffic.

It was the hullabaloo at the back of the building which recalled her to the present. The clatter of the restaurant tray on the parquet was the first alarm, and the babel followed when the office boy shouted the news.

It had been four-fifteen exactly when that young man knocked on the door of Meyrick's room and carried in the tea which Lucar had ordered so ungraciously. He had been halfway to the desk when he had seen the man and the tray had slipped from his hand.

Lucar was dead. Even a fourteen-year-old office teamaker had seen that much. The smug expression was still on his face, and he still sat in Meyrick's chair, but there was a narrow wound in his side where a thin steel blade had slid in between his ribs, piercing the chest wall and penetrating the heart itself. Lucar had died as Robert Madrigal had died, instantly and without a sound, and once again there was no trace of any weapon.

It was while the entire staff of the gallery was crowding on the back staircase, the only approach to the office while Gabrielle remained in possession of the antique room, that Frances, still not fully conscious of the smothered uproar two walls behind her, suddenly saw David Field come down the steps directly under the window and hurry off across the road.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AT EIGHT O'CLOCK there were still lights in the gallery, while in the house next door there was that atmosphere of bustle which alone makes crises bearable. As Frances carried two hot-water bottles across the hall she hardly noticed the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

plain-clothes man, sitting there silent and official. She hurried up the stairs for the twentieth time since Phillida's condition had become acute without looking at him. She had grown used to him.

Godolphin remained exactly where she had left him. He was still leaning over the banisters on the landing, his arm folded on the rail where the doctor's coat hung, and he did not glance at her as she passed.

The upper hall looked strange with all the doors open, and glimpses of the lighted rooms within were intimate and homely. Blankets lay about in piles and the linen press stood open, while the trolley bearing basins and ewers, which was drawn up outside the sickroom, added to the general air of deshabille. 38 Sallet Square was no longer a grande dame but a lady in her petticoat with her stockings coming down. There were whispers everywhere, the rattling of crocks and the hissing of kettles, hurrying footsteps and doors closing quietly.

Mrs Sanderson came tiptoeing out of Phillida's room with two bundles in her arms.

"I'm just going to heat these bricks up again," she murmured as they met. "When it comes to warmth you can't beat a brick. Just go in, miss. Don't knock. Poor thing, she's delirious again. Can you wonder at it? It's a miracle to me we're not all crawling up the walls."

She sped on and crackled starchily down the stairs while Frances let herself into Phillida's bedroom.

It was very warm in there, and old Dorothea bent over the fire where a small brass kettle was boiling. The doctor was standing at the end of the bed, his hands clasped loosely behind him. Frances was tremendously grateful to him. He was friendly enough but he also possessed, in manner at any rate, that superb quality of superhumanity which made it seem safe for Phillida to toss and mutter as much as she liked.

She lay with her lids parted, the narrow slits showing far too much of the whites of the eyeballs. She might have been an old woman, her face shrunken, with the nose pinched and the lips grey. Every now and again she spoke in a drunken whisper. It was for the most part indistinguishable, but single words came out with startling clarity.

"Daydream," said Dorothea. "She keeps saying 'daydream.' No warmth. No warmth yet. It's not right. Her hand's like a stone."

The doctor took Phillida's pulse again. He made no comment but replaced the limp arm very carefully and tucked the covers well over it.

"What's she done?" Frances put the question abruptly. "That can't be just fright, can it?"

"Shock?" he said, smiling faintly at her. "Oh, can't it! She's had the equivalent of a kick over the heart. There's nothing like emotion to upset the circula-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tory system. She was in a bad nervous condition to begin with, and this last shock seems to have toppled her over the edge."

"Will she be all right?"

He did not answer immediately but turned back to the bed.

"I think so," he said at last. "The only real danger at the moment is from infection. In a state like this resistance is practically nil, so there's always a danger from pneumonia or any other bug there may be about. She'll need constant watching."

Frances did not understand the dubious note in the last few words.

"You mean she can't be moved to a nursing home? But can't we have a couple of good nurses here?"

He hesitated, looking very uncomfortable.

"That would be ideal, of course, if it could be arranged."

"You mean they might not care to come to us?" The dismay on the small heart-shaped face turned up to him was so frank that he patted her shoulder.

"Well, it's an awkward time, isn't it?" he said gently. "It's no good having anyone second rate, either. Still, I'll try. I know the Pelham Street people pretty well, well enough to put it all to them. I'll see what I can do. I don't think I'll use this phone."

"No, no, of course not." Frances felt unsteady on her feet. Nothing else had brought the situation home to her quite so clearly. "There's an extension in my room next door. Will you come?"

She led him to it and was going out again when he stopped her.

"I wonder if you'd mind?" he said. "Just a minute. I'd like a few words with you if I may. Perhaps we'd better have the door closed. Mrs Madrigal's collapse occurred immediately after she heard the news of Mr Lucar's death, did it? Who told her? You?"

"I'm afraid I did. I helped Dorothea to bring my grandmother over from the gallery and then I went in to see Phillida. She was just going to bed. She had felt groggy all day, and I ought to have had more sense than to blurt the whole thing out. But I'm afraid I've grown so used to Phillida being ill. We all have."

He nodded gravely. "Naturally," he said. "There's so little to show in these nervous conditions. You simply told her flatly, did you?"

"I said Lucar had been killed."

"And then she collapsed?"

"Yes. I thought she'd merely fainted. I called Dorothea and we got her on the bed. Then I saw that her forehead was wet and we realised how cold she was. That was when I got on to you."

"I see," he said but he still hesitated, and she struggled on with her explanations.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We'd been having a sort of family conference," she volunteered. "Mr Lucar called it himself in my father's office in the gallery next door. When it was over most of us stayed there for a bit, in the building, I mean, but Phillida felt rotten, so Mr Godolphin brought her back here at once."

"Oh, did he?" The doctor brightened. "I hadn't realised that. Did he stay with her until you came?"

"No." Frances paused uncertainly. It was very difficult. Even to see his inference would be dangerous. "No," she repeated presently, "he didn't, as a matter of fact. He had to go out in a car."

"In a car?"

"Yes. I'm so sorry I'm being vague. It's quite simple really. You see, as they came back they saw the new car which Godolphin is thinking of buying had been sent along by the showroom people. The salesman had been waiting for some time, so Godolphin merely planted Phillida in her room and went off down again to try the car."

"Then she was alone in the house for . . . say . . . a half to three quarters of an hour before you came?"

"About half an hour. Lucar was found twenty minutes after we'd all left him, and we came over here almost immediately we heard what had happened. Because of Granny, you see. The servants were here all the time, of course."

"But weren't they in the basement?"

"They may have been. In fact, yes, they probably were most of the time."

"I see," he said again and stood looking at her, his tired face flushed with embarrassment. She was not looking very happy herself, and the shadows under her eyes were alarming. He smiled at her wryly. "You'll have to take it carefully yourself," he said. "It's an appalling ordeal. Look here, this isn't quite ordinary inquisitiveness, but there is one point I would like to know. Is there any connecting door between this house and the gallery?"

Frances flushed. "Yes," she said reluctantly. "It's Meyrick's own door. That's my father, of course. No one else ever dreams of using it. That's why it never occurred to any of us to go that way this afternoon, although it would have been much more sensible for Gabrielle. It may sound queer to you, but I've never been through that door in my life. Meyrick made a fetish of it."

"Where is it?"

She took a deep breath. After all, what did it matter? The police knew now and tomorrow everyone else would know.

"It opens from the back of the cupboard in Meyrick's bedroom," she said slowly, "and it leads into his office."

"His office? Isn't that where Mr Lucar died?"

She nodded miserably and he was acutely sorry for her, but also curious.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"If it wasn't used by anyone except your father I suppose it was kept locked?"

Frances shrugged her shoulders. She had expected this from the police, but if it had to come from the doctor what, after all, did it matter?

"It was bolted from this side," she said. "Meyrick kept it like that except when he was actually in the gallery, and when he went away it was left bolted. My grandmother has that bedroom now, and the connecting door was still bolted when we came back this afternoon. She's hardly ever out of the room, you see."

"Yet she was when Mr Lucar was killed?"

"Yes. She was over in the gallery."

He glanced at the telephone. "It's all extremely awkward," he said. "You realise that in all fairness I should have to explain the situation to any nurse who came?"

"For God's sake get someone discreet." The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them.

He glanced up sharply, and for a moment they eyed one another.

"Yes," he said, "that's important too. Well, I'll see. I can't promise but I'll see."

She left him dialling the number and was about to return to the sickroom when she saw Mrs Sanderson as she came out on the landing. Godolphin had disappeared from his sentry post, and she thought she heard him whispering to Dorothea round the corner by the sickroom door. Mrs Sanderson was evidently lying in wait for her. She was halfway up the staircase and now stood beckoning.

As Frances came forward so she retreated, leading her across the hall to the breakfast room with such ostentatious nonchalance that the plain-clothes man regarded them both hopefully. However, once in safety, with the door shut firmly behind them, her manner underwent a startling change.

"You must sit down, miss," she said, leering at her with cow-eyed pity at least three parts genuine. "Sit down and get out your handkerchief. I've just heard something that I think you ought to know before anyone else. Be brave, my dear. They've got him."

It worked. Frances was never quite able to forgive Mrs Sanderson or herself for that. A sinking void seemed to heave and swallow her and the brightly lit familiar room grew dark. The other woman watched her, compassion mixed with open satisfaction. She was a ghoul by temperament but not an unkindly one.

"Molly got it out of the man on the back door," she said. "They found his address and sent and took him down to the station. There's been no end of goings on at the gallery," she added, not without a touch of wistfulness. "Poor Mr David! You won't believe it, will you?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The last question was an entreaty, not to say a threat, and in spite of everything it struck Frances as funny.

"No," she said with a brisk conviction which almost spoiled Mrs Sanderson's moment, it sounded so authoritative. "No, of course not."

"He's at the station," persisted the housekeeper, making it clear that she hoped for gallantry rather than optimism. "Of course everybody knows now what happened. Mr Lucar told his suspicions, and the murderer 'ad to strike again. It's very terrible. He was such a nice man. Now you'll want to go away and have a good cry, won't you? There's no one in the servants' hall. You'd never be disturbed there. I'll make you a hot malted milk."

"No, I must go back to Phillida," said Frances, feeling more and more like the boy on the burning deck, yet assailed by an idiotic inclination to accept the offer.

"My brave girl!" There were real tears in Mrs Sanderson's eyes. Frances fled.

The plain-clothes man was not at his post, and it did not occur to her until afterwards that he had gone into the drawing room to listen through the inner door to the housekeeper's revelations. Just at that moment very few things were clear to her. It was not a time for intelligent thinking. David arrested? David proved guilty? It was absurd, ridiculous, impossible, not likely to be true, out of character, insane.

Insane? The word burst in her mind like a flare. More fantastic beliefs are held by the layman about insanity than about anything else in the civilised world. Frances was no alienist. She too had been brought up to believe in the shibboleths, and the smiling, mild-mannered homicidal maniac of superhuman strength and agility was a reality to her.

Insanity. The word opened up a dozen possibilities. If someone near and close should prove to be insane then anything was possible.

She had reached the foot of the stairs and had paused there, trying to get a hold on herself, when some way behind her the door of the garden room closed softly.

She stood listening. It was dark down that corridor, yet whoever was walking there did not trouble to turn on the light. She heard the footsteps on the stones, confident and yet careful. She had only a few seconds to wait. Nearer came the patter on the marble, nearer and nearer.

And then, as at last a figure emerged, she swung round, astonishment ousting all other emotions.

It was Gabrielle. She was quite alone and she looked unexpectedly commanding in a fitted quilted dressing gown made like a theatre coat. It was grey and hooded and lent her an odd fancy-dress appearance. She paused when she

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

saw Frances and her black eyes wavered guiltily.

"The house is nice and warm," she remarked.

"Oh, darling, you shouldn't." The girl swept aside this flagrant attempt to divert the issue. "You ought not to come downstairs alone."

"My dear child." Old Mrs Ivory flushed with anger. "I may be old but I'm not yet in my grave, I hope." She came forward confidently, remarkably sure of herself, her small body held up by sheer nervous strength. The ascent daunted her a little, however, and she accepted her granddaughter's arm. Frances found that she was trembling.

"Granny, you'll kill yourself," she said helplessly. "What did you want down there? Couldn't I have fetched it?"

Mrs Ivory paused on the stairs. She was breathless and shaky, but her eyes were honestly furious.

"No, you could not," she said. "You're a nice girl, but you can't see for me. No one can see for me with my eyes. No one can think for me. Oh, my God, Frances, if I could steal your body how I would!"

There was nothing whimsical about the final observation. Gabrielle was evidently speaking the literal truth.

Dorothea stood on the top of the stairs, her eyes popping out of her head.

"Madam!" she said.

She came down a step or two and Gabrielle relinquished Frances' arm and clutched the other woman.

"All right," she said and laughed. "All right, Dorothea. No talk. No recriminations. Take me to my room."

Dorothea did so quite literally. She bent her broad back, lowered her head and picked up her mistress. Gabrielle was tiny. She rode like a child, one arm round the other woman's neck, and her own head nodding slightly in its little quilted hood.

"You go to the doctor, miss, while I get Madam settled." Dorothea spoke over her shoulder. "There's no one with him. Poor man, he must think it's a madhouse."

Frances hurried down the hall to Phillida's room. She found the doctor outside the door, talking to Godolphin. They ceased abruptly as she came up and Godolphin nodded vigorously.

"I quite understand," he said. "I'll go across now and find somebody. Oh, my dear fellow, don't apologise. I agree with you. It's necessary, or at least it's wise. All right then, leave it to me."

He limped off, glad to be of some service.

"Did you get a nurse?" Frances put the question anxiously.

"Yes, I did." He smiled at her. "Two good women are coming along at once.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I rather thought I'd go and fetch them myself, as a matter of fact."

"That's extremely nice of you."

"Not at all." He looked a little uncomfortable. "I shall have to have a word with them in private and I thought I'd get it over in the car. Oh, and by the way, I . . . er . . . I thought that just to placate everybody and to put myself absolutely in the right with the Nursing Agency that I might get one of these plain-clothes men who are swarming about the place to go on duty outside this door. Then the nurses can't feel that they're in any dan . . . well, that there's anything to be excited about, can they?"

"You mean no one could attack them from outside?" she murmured.

"I mean then no one could attack them at all, my dear," he said briskly. "Mr Godolphin offered to fix it. He's been very helpful. He's *the* Godolphin, isn't he? What's his position here?"

A wild inclination to say, "He's Phillida's real husband" and see what happened assailed Frances, but she controlled it and answered cautiously.

"He's not a relative but he's a very old friend. When he came back and found us in this mess and heard that Daddy was held up in quarantine he offered to stay and do what he could."

"Oh, I see." The doctor was satisfied. "Good of him," he commented, but she fancied his glance was thoughtful, and she wondered what Phillida might have let slip in that strange blurred muttering of hers.

With the departure of the doctor and the return of Mrs Sanderson to keep vigil in the sickroom a temporary peace descended on the house.

Frances went into her own room and sat down on the bed. For the first time she realised how weary she was.

She was still sitting there when Dorothea found her. The old woman came in with a mumble of mingled relief and reproach and plumped herself down in the bedside chair.

"I'm sorry, miss," she said with that slight truculence which is born of fear, "I can't help it. I think my legs will give way any minute."

"Oh, Dorothea!" Frances scrambled off the bed, alarmed and contrite. "Dorothea, I'm so sorry. What can I get you? I forget that you're not younger than any of us. We all do."

"It's not the work; that's nothing. You sit down yourself, miss." Dorothea was breathing deeply and her square wrinkled face was pallid. "I'm as strong as ever I was. No, it's not that. It's me heart."

She laid her hand on her stiff black bosom expressively.

"It's me heart," she repeated and shot a sidelong glance at the girl. "I love the mistress," she began after a pause. "If she was my own mother I couldn't love her more."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She was silent and Frances, looking at her, was startled to see tears slip out of her eyes and slide down over her cheeks. Tears and wrinkles are ever an appalling combination, but in Dorothea, that tower of strength and common sense, they were terrifying. A drop fell on her hand, and she looked down at it in surprise.

"I'm off me head," she said, brushing her eyes angrily. "But, oh, Miss Frances, my dear, I'm so frightened. You see, it's not the first time I've found her wandering about this house."

"What?"

"There, there, my dear, don't get excited." Now that the admission was made and her secret out Dorothea was much more herself again. "It doesn't actually signify. But I must tell somebody for my own peace of mind. It's no good me talking to the police; they'd only come and worry her and she's too old for that. Besides, I won't have it. They bully her over my dead body."

"But, Dorothea, what is this? What do you mean? When did you find her wandering about the house before? Not on the night . . ."

"Yes, I did. On the night Mr Robert must have died. She was wandering about the house in the pitch dark. She knows the place so well, you see. We lived here for thirty years. You get to know a house in that time."

Frances sat down abruptly. "You'd better tell me," she said.

Dorothea bent forward and lowered her voice to the earnest monotone of confidence.

"Do you remember meeting me outside Miss Phillida's door that night?" she said. "You remarked that it was a pity the mistress had come and I said yes, it was and that she was very angry with Mr Robert. I know I told you then that she wouldn't go to bed."

"I remember. Go on."

"I'm telling you. I went back to her then and she seemed quieter, but still I couldn't get her to go to bed anyhow. After a bit I went out and left her. That always annoys her, and I thought it might bring her to her senses. I went down to the kitchen to get her a drop of hot milk. Norris was out that night, and I got talking with Mrs Sanderson and Molly. I don't know how long I was there, but it might have been well over an hour. Anyway, when I came back with the glass on a tray I found all the lights in the place were out."

"Who did that?"

"I don't know. At the time I thought Mr Robert had probably done it himself. I didn't turn on the hall light myself because it wasn't as if I was at home, and I could get on just as well without it, considering the hundreds of times I've come up those stairs. I went across the landing and pushed open her door. 'Here I am,' I said and waited for her to say something pretty sharp to me."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She paused and looked at the girl with some of the bewilderment of that moment echoed in her eyes.

"She wasn't there. The room was empty. I couldn't believe it. She's been so helpless for the last year. Well, I was at my wit's end. I set the milk down and went out again. I didn't know what to do."

There was vividness in the old voice, and Frances saw her standing on the threshold of the big shadowy bedroom, the fire dying low behind her.

"I was afraid, you see." Dorothea's whisper was urgent. "I knew the house but I didn't know the people. There'd been one noise in the house already, and I didn't want to make another."

"Noise?"

"Well, row, then. But it's not a nice word. Mr Robert had forgotten himself to the mistress in the afternoon. Poor fellow! When I heard he was dead I was sorry but I could never have forgiven him for the things he said to her that day if he'd lived to be a hundred. There I was, wondering what on earth I ought to do, when I heard her coming across the hall. I knew it was her. I'd know her step anywhere. But I couldn't believe my ears. I hadn't heard her walk like that for twenty years. She was brisk, you know, walking like a proper little madam. I ran to the top of the stairs and called her softly because I didn't want to rouse the house. 'Is that you?' I said. 'Yes,' she said and her voice was young too. I thought I was out of my mind. She was so angry, you see, it had given her strength. I went down and found her and brought her up to the fire. She was quite calm, not at all shaky as she was tonight, but just calm and wilful and wonderfully clear in her mind. That was when she told me to send the cable."

"She told you *then*?"

"Of course she did." Dorothea prodded her listener's knee. "That was how I got the address. I tell you she was ten years younger that night, although she had to pay for it afterwards, poor dear. She was just like she used to be, sharp as a needle, with every fact she wanted slap at her finger tips. She remembered Mr Meyrick had given her the Hong Kong cable address and that it was in her black book in her writing case. She made me write out the message there and then. 'Come home immediately. Your presence vital in new development. Gabrielle.' That's how it ran. I promised her I'd send it off the first thing the next day. That's why I sent Molly to the post office with it in the morning. I didn't have time to phone it or to run out myself with the mistress lying there exhausted."

"So Molly sent it? That's how the inspector heard about it? Is that why you dismissed her when Robert was found?"

Dorothea sniffed.

"Yes, that was a silly thing to do," she said. "I lost my head. When he was

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

found I lost my head. I couldn't forget that she'd been about that night. I don't know what I thought, so don't ask me. I only felt that I couldn't have the poor dear questioned, and the simplest thing to do seemed to be to get rid of the girl before she remembered anything. I went down and packed her off. In my young days there'd have been no questions asked and no reasons given. I'd forgotten how things have changed. There was such a setout you'd have thought I was getting rid of a member of Parliament, let alone a housemaid. I called attention to the whole thing instead of hiding it up. I had to come and tell the mistress and she acted us both out of it, the wonderful little old dear."

The quiet voice ceased and there was silence in the room for a minute or so before Frances could bring herself to ask the question which was nagging at her.

"Dorothea," she began cautiously at last, "you didn't leave Gabrielle today, did you?"

"While she was in the picture gallery?"

"Yes."

"Only for a quarter of an hour. She was sitting in a chair and she dropped off to sleep, or I thought she did. You can't tell with her these days; she's so artful. I knew she wouldn't be disturbed there and I wanted to make sure they hadn't forgotten the fire in her bedroom. I went back the way we came, past Mr Meyrick's door and down the back stairs. I got out into the yard and popped into our kitchen here. I talked for rather a long time with Norris and the other two. He said he'd just been up to see to the fire and it went through my mind that he might have been listening through that door in the cupboard.

"I don't know how much you can hear through that. Anyway, they pretended to be all agog to hear what had happened at the meeting and I was careful not to tell them. I suppose I was talking for over ten minutes, maybe quarter of an hour, maybe more. When I came back they'd found Mr Lucar and all the excitement was on."

"Was Granny awake when you got to her?"

"Yes. She was walking about the room. She was as bright as she is tonight. I noticed the change in her. It's almost as if these upsets give her a new interest in life."

Her voice died away and she sat thinking. After a while she laughed.

"I'm daft," she said. "She couldn't. It's silly. Even if her poor sweet mind had gone and she'd taken it into her head to do something so wicked, she couldn't. She hasn't the strength. It's us, Miss Frances. We're the lunatics. She couldn't do it. Besides, what with?"

Frances did not speak at once. A quotation from the flowery history book of her nursery days had come sneaking into her mind. "If but the blades be sharp enough a child can drive it home, my Lord Burleigh."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Would she do it?" she demanded bluntly. "I mean, just supposing she could. Would she? Can you conceive her doing it?"

Dorothea's reply was startling.

"Not unless she thought she was so old it didn't matter," she said.

"Didn't matter?" said Frances, aghast.

"What happened to her afterwards. Very old people are funny, miss. They've got so used to the idea of dying that they get to behaving sort of wild, like people going to emigrate. She's so clear in her mind that this life is over for her that she's half living in the next. She's still young in her heart, you see, still adventuresome. She's impatient, that's what she is. I don't know what she might do."

"But she couldn't . . ."

"No, my dear, she couldn't, thank God." Dorothea dried her eyes with a single wipe from the flat of her hand. "I feel better," she remarked naïvely. "It's keeping it all to oneself that makes one fanciful. Once it's in words you do know it's silly."

"Yet someone did it," Frances said slowly.

"Eh? Yes, yes, someone did it." Dorothea sounded almost casual. "Still, *she's* safe from trouble, that's all I care. She's sitting up by the fire. She's wonderfully wilful and very bright again tonight. I'll just go along to see how Miss Phillida is. You go along to your granny, my dear. Tell her I'm just coming."

Frances followed her to the door. They parted on the landing and the girl turned towards Gabrielle's room. She walked heavily. Dorothea might be able to trot off happily, but for her own part she found the new details terrifying. Why had Gabrielle been wandering about the house on the night that Robert died?

She entered the dark alcove where Meyrick's door was and had already raised her hand to tap on the panelling when she heard Gabrielle talking. The high thin voice was raised authoritatively and the words came clearly through the wood and leather.

"All my life I have done what I thought best. I see no reason to change that behaviour. Have you ever been told that you look like the prince consort?"

Frances felt her scalp crawling. As far as she knew there was no one in the house who could possibly be with the old lady.

She opened the door abruptly and went in. Gabrielle confronted her. She was seated facing the door in a high-backed chair which had been temporarily lined with her enormous swansdown shawl. The lights were shaded and the glow from the coal fire picked out the brilliance of her black eyes and the rings on her fingers.

At first glance Frances thought that she was alone and talking to herself and

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she was just facing the new problem which such a discovery might well present when the wing chair standing on the rug between them shot back a little as a man rose up out of it.

"David!"

His sudden appearance was so unexpected that she forgot herself entirely and her voice rose. They both hushed her vigorously.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, reddening at the injustice which such treatment always seems to contain, "but I thought you were . . ."

"Arrested." Gabrielle supplied the missing word. "But he seems either to have been let out or to have escaped." She let her voice rise enquiringly but he did not explain. He stood on the hearthrug, his hands in his pockets and his head bent.

Frances glanced at him anxiously and found him watching her thoughtfully, without smiling.

"I've been asking Mrs Ivory to shut the house," he said. "Split up. Pack the servants off. If Phillida's ill let her go into a nursing home. You can go to a hotel, Frances. Mrs Ivory herself can return to Hampstead. Get the house empty."

"What? Tonight?"

"Oh, lord, yes, it must be tonight."

"But, David, we can't." In her reaction against the impracticability of the suggestion Frances forgot for a moment how extraordinary it was that he should be there at all. "We can't," she repeated. "Anyway, we're not allowed to. We're all to stay here until Inspector Bridie has finished with the gallery and can come over and interview us all again. There's a policeman in the front hall and another on the back door now. Didn't you see them as you came in?"

"No. I —er — I didn't come that way."

"I heard his tapping at the cupboard," explained Gabrielle calmly. "I thought it was the police so I let him in. He has not cared to explain how he came to be in my son's private office." There was no rebuke in her tone. She made the statement as if it referred to some minor unconventionality into which she was too polite to enquire.

Frances glanced at the small cupboard beside the fireplace. The door was bolted again now. She could see the brass catch clearly against the panelling. David followed her eyes gloomily but he made no comment, and it was the old lady who returned to the main subject.

"Quite impossible," she said, resettling herself. "And if it weren't I should still stay. There is something I want to know." Her voice had a new tone in it and he turned to her. For a moment he looked positively frightened, but as his eye took in her frailty and her great age his alarm died a little.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I hope you're not thinking of turning detective, Mrs Ivory," he murmured.

The old Gabrielle appeared to consider the suggestion.

"No," she said at last. "No. But I'm a very inquisitive old woman, and in all this dreadful business there is one thing that strikes me as very strange indeed. First, Madrigal, poor wretched creature, is found dead with a wound in his chest. Then that abominable little baggageman dies in the same way. As far as any reasonable person can see both crimes were committed by the same person, who must be someone who is still either in this house or in the gallery next door. So much is obvious. However, the thing that seems so entirely extraordinary to me is this: both houses have been searched over and over again and yet no weapon has been found. I find this so peculiar that I have given my mind to it, and an idea has occurred to me which may eventually explain a number of things."

The precise Victorian English and the conversational tone made the words unexpectedly dramatic.

"I am not going to tell you or anyone else what it is," she said, "because if I am wrong then I have made a very serious and unjust mistake. So I shall stay here until I find out for myself. What is the matter, Mr Field?"

David's eyes were warning and when he spoke his voice sounded dry.

"That's a very dangerous statement. Have you made it to anybody else?"

The old lady peered at him and then turned sharply to glance at the cupboard door beside her.

"No," she said. "No, I have not. But you come to me with a suggestion and I am explaining to you why I am not adopting it. Now, forgive me. I am tired. Frances will take you downstairs."

It was her usual dismissal, imperious and unanswerable. He moved obediently but when he was halfway across the room he turned again.

"You mustn't," he said. "For God's sake. Think of everybody else."

The black eyes flickered in his direction, and for an instant both young people saw her as she must have been at the height of her powers.

"One more day," she said so quietly that her voice would not carry through any panelling. "One more day."

"What does she mean?" Frances whispered the question as they came out into the alcove. His hand closed over her arm warningly. He did not move but stood listening, holding her back in the shadow. No one was in sight, but all around them the house was alive. David bent over her.

"Is there a fire escape to this house? Keep your voice down."

Frances stiffened. Until that moment she had not taken Gabrielle's airy statement about his escape from arrest with any degree of seriousness. He saw her expression and his eyes wavered.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Sorry, Duchess," he murmured, "but it can't be helped. Where's the bolt hole?"

"Up here." She took his wrist and drew him hastily across the narrow end of the landing to the flight of steep stairs leading up to the third floor. Neither of them spoke until they were out on the roof, standing in a narrow valley beneath the shadow of a chimney stack. It was very dark up there. The fidgety wind leapt on them avidly, snatching at their clothes and blowing soot in their eyes.

Frances steadied herself in the guttering.

"You go straight along here," she said huskily, ridiculously concerned because her teeth were chattering. "Then over the parapet to the next house — it's only offices so there's no one there now to hear you — then the iron ladder goes down at the back of the house. You'll have to drop the last eight feet, but it'll be all right if you're careful."

"I see. Thank you." He did not move and she could not see his face.

"Well?" she said at last.

His hand found her shoulder and closed over it. He did not speak for a long time but he rocked her gently, his fingers gripping her very tight.

"Come with me."

"Where?"

"Holland. God knows what I'm letting you in for, but come and we'll risk it. . . . It's pure selfishness on my part."

"Why?"

He laughed explosively.

"Oh, darling," he said, "at such a time! Are you coming?"

"How can I? Phillida's ill, Gabrielle's alone. I must stay with them."

He let her go.

"Yes," he said unexpectedly. "Yes, of course." And then, with more urgency than she had ever heard from him before: "Frances. Be careful. Don't hear anything. Don't think anything. And for God's sake don't say anything. Watch Gabrielle. Never let her be left alone, not for a minute. Do you understand?"

"Yes. What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not." He spoke passionately. "That's the line you've got to drop. Drop it. Rout it out. Forget it. Turn yourself into a mindless vegetable. Don't think. Don't put two and two together. And keep Gabrielle quiet. Put her to bed and lock the door with yourself on the inside."

"You're going to Holland?"

He swore softly in the darkness.

"I shouldn't have told you that. That's the slip we all make. That's unforgivable. That's the one thing you must never tell anyone. Never, whatever happens. Promise. Word of honour."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes," she said flatly. "Yes, of course. Word of honour."

She heard him move irresolutely, and then unexpectedly he bent over and kissed her, holding her so roughly that in spite of her fierce and rather terrifying relief she was aware that he was hurting her. The next moment he had left her and was clambering purposefully over the roofs.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"THEY BROADCAST an unfortunately good description of him over the air in the ten-to-twelve news last night. Silly chap. He can't hope to get away with it. The country's too small," said Godolphin gloomily and pushed his plate away.

The breakfast room at 38 Sallet Square was stuffy and the electric light made the hour, which was noon, seem unlikely and in keeping with the timeless confusion of the whole period. Frances, who was sitting on the other side of the table, her chin in her hands and an untasted cup beside her, thought of the previous midnight as an age away, an undefined moment in a horrible and distant past. It had been twelve hours of mounting strain. The house was in chaos. The domestic routine had broken down utterly, and a sense of siege was everywhere.

On the news of the second crime the crowds in the street had returned in greater numbers, and the heavy old-fashioned shutters barred over the breakfast-room windows made a temporary barrier between the stricken household and the sensation seekers standing patiently in the rain and the wind of the square.

The meal was a formless hybrid, midway between breakfast and luncheon. Mrs Sanderson had done what she could at a time when food seemed one of the least important of life's considerations.

The hall and landings had become foreign territory. The police possessed them, newspapermen stormed them, and every now and again a strange nurse in starched linen and sensible shoes crackled through them on her way to the kitchen.

Inspector Bridie had made a thorough search of both houses, and in his vocabulary the adjective had a particular meaning. His search had included the space beneath the floor boards, the contents of the mattresses, and the drains. So far it had been fruitless. The weapon which had killed Robert Madrigal and afterwards Henry Lucar had disappeared as completely and unsatisfactorily as if it had never existed.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

No one in the house had had anything faintly approaching a night's rest. The interminable questionings had gone on hour after hour and mere nerves had given place to a state of grim endurance. Even Godolphin had begun to show the scars of the ordeal. There was a white line of excitement round his mouth, and when he limped about the hand which gripped his stick was heavily veined under the yellow skin.

"Silly young ass," Godolphin repeated under his breath and sat up when he saw the spasm of pain flicker over her face. "Sorry," he said abruptly. "Wouldn't have mentioned it if I'd known. I understood that engagement of yours was a put-up job. I shouldn't have said it for worlds if I'd thought."

He was looking at her with great interest in his dark eyes, and she noticed, as one does notice irrelevant details in time of stress, that the whites of them were still yellow from his fever.

"You're kidding yourself, you know," he said. "You're young so you don't realise it. Love does get one but there's nothing in it. All painters have a sort of romantic glow round them, but they're silly, oversensitive beggars when you get to know them. Impractical, too. Look at this wild flight of his. What's he got to fear? There's not a shred of evidence against him that the police could prove. You're well rid of him. I don't expect you to agree with me now but you will. You'll see. You're a sensible girl. Besides, I mean to say, take love altogether. I know it. It's a tremendous thing while it lasts but it goes. That's the thing to remember about love. You love like hell for years and then you see the woman again and you see her in a new light."

Frances took a long deep breath. The full force of the famous personality was like a blast from an oven. She felt dizzy and physically sick.

He hoisted himself onto another chair nearer to her and, seeing him prepare for a new attack, she drew back involuntarily.

"If only he had had the sense to sit tight," he said. "Suppose it had come to a trial. Wouldn't you have backed him? Wouldn't I? Wouldn't Phillida and even the old lady? Of course we would, if only to save our own faces. A balanced chap would have seen that."

It occurred to Frances that she was going to cry. The discovery appalled her and she rose to her feet, choking. As she turned blindly to the door, however, it opened and Miss Dorset appeared with Dorothea in tow. Both women were exhausted and untidy. Miss Dorset conveyed a dishevelment which was as much mental as any matter of coiffure or shoestrings.

"I made her come down," she said breathlessly. "She must eat something or she'll drop. You've got some coffee here, Norris says."

"Of course we have." Frances set a chair for the old woman as she spoke. Dorothea was exhausted, but a lifetime's training seemed to forbid her to sit

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on more than two inches of the proffered seat, since she was in company.

"I didn't ought to be down here," she grumbled, taking a cup grudgingly, "but she is dozing now, though, and that Mrs Sanderson has promised to stay with her. What a night it's been. I don't think she's closed her eyes once and it was all I could do to keep her in the room. It'll kill her in the end, this will. She's got something on her mind, you know. She's overexcited. I thought she was going to fly out of the bed when the police asked if Miss Dorset could come through the cupboard door."

Both Frances and Godolphin looked up at this piece of information and Miss Dorset flushed.

"The inspector thought it would be better if I avoided the street," she murmured. "The crowd is waiting, hoping to see a woman."

Frances sat up. "Me?" she demanded.

Miss Dorset leant forward and laid a hand over hers.

"It's Mr Field running away," she said gently. "They don't *think*, you know. They just get hold of a dramatic idea. Never mind. It's all going to be all right. I've just heard and I had to come over. Mr Meyrick's been released and he's coming back. He left this morning and we shall have him here any time after four. I nearly broke down and cried when I saw the message."

She looked positively happy and the others exchanged glances. Dorothea put the general thought into words.

"I'll be most relieved to see him, but I don't know what he can do, poor man," she remarked, sipping her coffee. "It's past anyone doing much, if you ask me."

"But there'll be someone to tell us what to do." Miss Dorset sounded as if she had nothing more to ask. Her confidence was so sublime that they were encouraged in spite of themselves, and the atmosphere grew momentarily less oppressive. Nevertheless they all started violently when someone tapped on the door.

It was Bridie himself. He disconcerted everyone by saying nothing at all, but he accepted Frances' offer of coffee with a nod of alacrity. Godolphin seized the opportunity to ask questions.

"Any news of Field yet?" he enquired, fixing the older man with inquisitive eyes.

"Not a wor-rd of him, silly young chuggins." The inspector seemed to be in an ominously genial mood.

"Do you think you'll get him?"

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that. It's chust a question of time. It's a tickens of a chob to escape us." Bridie dismissed the question as ridiculous. "It's these wretched chournalists who're the bother," he added. "Most tenacious chaps.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There was one on the roof chust now, and no young lady to help him either."

He laughed at Frances as he made the remark but ignored the colour which came into her face. His manner altered abruptly, however, as he turned to Dorothea.

"Where's your mistress?" he demanded.

"Mrs Sanderson is with her, sir."

"She is? Oh, well, she's a sensible body. All the same . . ."

He broke off as the door opened and Inspector Withers put his head in. His long face was lined with anxiety.

"There's a young man out here says he must see Mr Godolphin on a matter of life or death," he said suspiciously.

"Really?" The explorer took his stick and hoisted himself to his feet. "Who is it? What does he say?"

"He won't speak." Withers sounded irritable.

"I'll come. Where is he? In the hall?"

Godolphin hobbled out at a great speed, and Withers followed him. Evidently the residents of 38 Sallet Square were not to have private interviews with any visitor that morning.

Bridie passed his empty cup to his hostess with engaging diffidence.

"I'm not a great drinker as a cheneral rule," he remarked, "but a chob like this makes one thirsty." His new friendliness was disconcerting, and Frances' hand shook as she held the saucer. The rattling cup attracted his attention and he smiled at her kindly. "Cheer up," he said. "It's a fe-ear-rful business but we're near-ring the finish. You'll all be able to sleep easy in your beds tonight without a chance of being murdered there."

"Can you say that definitely, Inspector?" Miss Dorset was leaning across the table, her ugly light eyes eager.

Bridie looked at her squarely. "Quite definitely," he said. "Four o'clock, that's the hour. We'll all know a great deal more about this chiggery-pokery at four o'clock, and by the way, Miss Dorset, for your own infor-rmation, all the telephone lines in this house and the next are tapped and have been for some time."

The effect on the woman of this gratuitous piece of information was astonishing. She grew very white, all except for her nose and the red rims round her eyes. She closed her lips tightly and shrank back into her chair.

The moment was saved most unexpectedly by a great bellow of laughter outside the door as Withers and Godolphin came in together. Both men were amused, Godolphin rather sourly so but the inspector guffawing openly. Bridie regarded him with sober disapproval.

"Having a cholly good choke?" he enquired acidly.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes sir." Withers recovered his habitual gloom. "It was the chap's optimism," he added and Godolphin laughed briefly.

"The fool of a motor salesman from the showrooms down the road," he said. "I've been considering a new Packard and they gave me a trial run in it yesterday, as I told you. It was when I came back that I found the house in uproar. Apparently I had promised to phone this youngster in the morning but naturally I hadn't given the matter another thought."

"He got past the men on the door," murmured Withers. "Some salesman."

Godolphin grunted. "He won't come back for a bit now," he said grimly. "That sort of thing always irritates me. Any man with a grain of intelligence would have realised that this wasn't the time to badger a prospective customer."

"It must mean a very big commission to him," muttered Miss Dorset.

"Of course it is, considerable." Godolphin was contemptuous. "That's why it's so silly to jeopardise it."

Bridie put down his cup with a rattle.

"Ah well," he said, rising, "the young lad was an hour or so too early, that's all."

"Four o'clock," said Frances with a sigh.

"Four o'clock," repeated the Scotsman, watching Miss Dorset.

Inspector Withers looked scandalised and Frances added a new piece of information to her store. Bridie was giving away an official secret. She wondered why.

"Oh, that's zero hour, is it? I hadn't heard that," put in Godolphin. "What are we to expect meantime?"

"Nothing, please God." Bridie spoke fervently but was not rewarded for his piety, for the door burst open almost immediately, admitting a very angry woman.

Nurse King was a thickset woman with a dark-skinned face and heavy brows meeting across her forehead. She was not a person who was used to defeat, and her present state of indignation and alarm had also a modicum of astonishment in it.

"I must resign," she said. "If I'm to have no authority, if I'm to be ordered here and there like a servant, if I'm to be called this and that and turned out of my own patient's room as if I were a paid spy, I must go. That's all there is for me to do. No one would stand for it and no one can expect me to."

"Of course not." Frances was already halfway across the room towards the woman. "Of course not, nurse. She's ill, though. It's the frightful shock. Didn't the doctor tell you? She doesn't know what she's saying, I'm sure of that."

"Even so, Miss Ivory, I'm entitled to a little consideration. I've had a difficult

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

time with Mrs Madrigal without being ordered about by a second patient."

"Chimminy!" Bridie upset a chair as he lunged forward. "Who are ye talking about, woman?"

"Oh, I'm not complaining about my patient." The nurse flushed a dusky scarlet at the suggestion. "I'm not likely to mind anything my patient says, I hope. But when one of the household comes in and orders me out as if I were a probationer I do have something to say. 'No listening at the door, my good woman,' she says. 'Be off with you. No impudence.' I've never been spoken to like it in my life."

"Gabrielle!" Frances ejaculated. "Mrs Sanderson must have left her."

"Ma God!" The words broke from Bridie as he turned and fled out into the hall with Withers behind him.

His reaction was revealing and they all followed, swarming up the broad staircase, yet a new fear clutching at their skirts. They passed Withers on the landing. He was in a corner talking bitterly in a low voice to the plain-clothes man who had been on duty outside the sickroom. The detective was grovelling, clearly incapable of explaining how it was that an old woman should have been able to intimidate him.

The bedroom door was open and they filed in. Phillida was lying back among the pillows, her face as white as the linen, while on the end of the bed, calm, obstinate and completely mistress of the situation, sat a Gabrielle whom no one had ever seen before. She had shrunk, settling down inside herself until she looked like a netsuke, swathed in white lace wool. Her frailty was no longer her dominant feature. Instead she had become minute and vital, a concentrated essence of herself. Her face was so wrinkled that it was ageless and unreal, and her black eyes were bright and dangerous.

Bridie stood looking at her with something that was almost like superstition, and they realised for the first time how much the incident had shaken him. Frances looked anxiously at Phillida, but the dull-eyed woman in the bed made no sign of recognition and she called the nurse, who bustled over to the bed and put her foot down after a single glance. The room must be cleared instantly, she said, or she could not be responsible.

Her anxiety impressed even Bridie, who cleared his throat.

"We'll have to have an end of all this," he said, speaking slowly and quietly. "For a few hours I've got to have ye all under ma eyes and since I can't be in two places at once I'll have ye all together, everybody, servants and all. We'll all go down to the drawing room and we'll set there together until four o'clock."

"Not *her*." Dorothea forgot her place for the first time in a life in what she was pleased to call "gentleman's service." Her square face was suffused with blood and her body shook with the violence of her protest. "She shan't. She

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

goes down there over my corpse. She's old. She's not herself. Her mind's not right. She'll work herself up and say things she doesn't know she's saying. I'll take her back to her room. She's fanciful. She's old. You can't judge her like anyone else. You take her over my dead body."

"Thank you, Dorothea, that will do." The thin voice was icily amused. "I shall certainly go down to the drawing room, as the inspector suggests. There are one or two things I should very much like to say."

Bridie was looking at her in undisguised astonishment.

"I don't think you were very well, ma'am, last time I had a chat with you," he ventured.

Gabrielle favoured him with one of her more exquisite smiles.

"Perhaps I was not," she said. "Age is a curious malady, my dear man. There are times when one almost recovers from it."

Bridie's eyes flickered, and the old lady laughed as if she had made a conquest.

A slight movement on the other side of the room caught the policeman's attention, and he turned round just in time to see Miss Dorset edging towards the door. She stopped dead in her tracks as he called her and turned to face him defiantly, like a child.

"You'll hardly need me," she said.

"Chust the same," he said, "I'd like ye to be there."

"But I can't. I have an appointment just after three-thirty."

"Ye've got an appointment now. If ye were thinking of meeting Mr Meyrick Ivory's train, I'm sorry but I'll have to ask ye to change yer mind."

She hesitated and for a moment it looked as if she were thinking of defying him. He watched her thoughtfully.

"There's an extension telephone in the drawing room," he said. "I'll arrange for all your business calls to be put through there."

The simple offer, with the slight emphasis on the word "business," had its effect. Miss Dorset stood blinking at him, a foolish expression on her face.

"Very well," she said huskily and turned slowly out of the room, a crushed and submissive figure.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THEY TROOPED into the drawing room like an old-fashioned household going in to family prayers. Norris turned on the lights, for the winter afternoon was dark, and the haste with which Mrs Sanderson and Molly pulled the heavy

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

window curtains reminded everyone afresh of the patient crowds outside.

Gabrielle took the largest chair by the fire and Dorothea stood beside her. Frances sat in a corner of a chesterfield, with Godolphin perched stiffly on the arm beside her, while Miss Dorset placed herself next to the occasional table where the telephone stood. The three servants sat together near the door.

It was when Bridie had taken up his own position behind the Louis XV table, with Withers at his elbow, that Frances first became nervously aware of the clock. The gilt sunburst with the garden face was as familiar to her as the room itself, but today it was a new and menacing thing.

It was half-past two, later than she had thought, and she moved uneasily in her quilted corner. There was a tremendous sense of constriction in the room. No one breathed easily, and the entire gathering was aware of that tingling sensation in the soles of the feet which comes just before the worst is told.

Bridie's sibilant voice cut into their thoughts.

"It's against all the rules of police procedure for me to question any witness in front of another," he was saying pleasantly. "There's absolutely no question about that. However, I'm not proposing to keep ye here in silence until four o'clock so I've decided to give ye a sor-rt of cheneral lecture on the two crimes, and when I come to any bit that I'm not so sure about then I shall expect your intelligent coöperation."

His simple words and confiding smile were so naïve that they were almost deceived, all, that is, save Frances, who had seen the old Scot in this particular dangerous mood once before.

"Noo," he said, glancing about him with the bland affability which was so misleading, "since ye're none of ye professionally skilled in the ar-rt of investigation I'll commence ma observations with a few cheneral remarks. In this particular affair, which is all the more shockin' to ye since ye're all so close to it, I want ye to get into your minds a lar-rge square of boar-rd on which there is a half-finished chigsaw puzzle. Ye can see by the shape of the hole which is left that ye need a human heid to complete the picture."

He paused and his bright eyes swept round the gathering with horrific good humour.

"A human heid with a recognisable face."

It was an oddly unpleasant simile and, coming on top of the strain which was already so great, its effect was unnerving. Bridie seemed quite pleased with it, however, for he continued happily.

"The missing pieces of the chigsaw are held by different indiveeduals, and most of them are in this room, no question about that. Each pairson conseedering his own piece of puzzle is confronted by a wee mystery, but as soon as they're all on the table together the little chuts and corners will begin to fit

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and gradually the face will appear. It's cholly inchenious."

"Cholly good work, sir," murmured Godolphin under his breath to Frances, who did not hear him. Her eyes were on the clock. Fifteen minutes gone already.

"Hooever," Bridie swept on, "the fir-rst thing to do is to define the outline of the heid. That's the main conseederation. The background of the picture has to be built up fir-rst, and the main ar-rt of this piece of construction is to weed out all unnecessary matter — mebbe I'm too complicated for ye?"

"On the contrary." Gabrielle's voice was sharp. "We find you extraordinarily clear. Go on."

"I'm glad to hear it, ma'am," said Bridie with what appeared to be innocent satisfaction. "We'll now descend to the parteecular. Over three weeks ago Mr Robert Madrigal disappeared. A week later his body was discovered and on the same day Henry Lucar sailed for New York. As soon as he received wor-rd of the occurrence he returned, hooever, of his own free will. He was examined by the police and permitted to go home. The following day he called a conference of the relations and associates of Robert Madrigal and was himself mysteeriously mur-rdered by the same weapon which had killed his chief. This perneecious act took place only a few minutes after that gathering had broken up and while most of it was still in the gallery. That's an undisputed fact. We noo cut out the unnecessary factor-r. The murder of Henry Lucar does not merit our immediate conseederation and I'll tell ye for why. Henry Lucar was a blackmailin' scoundrel, no question of that. We have evidence to show that during his lifetime Robert Madrigal paid out conseederable sums of money which coincided in amount and date with sums paid into Lucar's account. We also know that chust before Mr Madrigal disappeared he and Lucar were both present in the gallery when one of Mr Field's pictures was slashed by an unknown hand. This was the last of several such incidents and the inference is that Lucar did the mischief to for-rce Mr Madrigal to face up to the fact that he was seerious in some last and more ineequitous demand. It was a show of strength, d'ye see?"

"Yes." Frances bit the word off hastily and the old man beamed at her.

"It's a bit of a chumble," he said, "but it soon straightens oot. Well, Lucar was a blackmailer and so it was never likely that he did away with Mr Madrigal before he'd squeezed all the chuice out of him. Moreover, I am convinced that Lucar left England before he knew for cer-rtain that Madrigal was deid. As soon as the news reached him he scuttled home, proved his alibi beyond question, and set off to blackmail again. What hold he had over Mr Madrigal we do not know, but we do know the almighty secret he shared with someone else. He knew who had killed Madrigal, ye see? As soon as he heard the man was deid he knew who had killed him, and when he called that conference this time yesterday afternoon he made the fact cholly plain to someone in that room.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Whether he made it clear to the murderer or to an accomplice of the murderer does not matter. He let out that he knew the truth, and within an hoor he was deid himself. That's a simple story. We've got the motive and in time we'll get the pairson concer-rned, but for the moment we can disregar-rd Lucar altogether. When we get the one heid filled in that picture will do for the other chigsaw as well."

He paused and looked up at the clock and every eye in the room followed him. It was five past three. The emotional temperature in the room was rising to fever heat.

"The main picture," continued Bridie calmly, "concairns Robert Madrigal, as it always did. A great many of the chigetty bits are in ma own hands and already I've built up ma surround. The fir-rst piece we need is a question of motive. It'll probably surprise one or two of ye to hear that ye all had the best money motives in the wor-rld for killing Madrigal."

He made the final statement conversationally, as if he were relating some interesting academic point, and hurried on before anyone could protest.

"He was ruining ye all. Unless something drastic was done he'd have steered the fir-rm into liquidation. Some of ye know this and some of ye don't, but for the purpose o' clarity I'm going to have it all oot on the table. Some years ago Robert Madrigal put his entire for-rtune into the fir-rm of Ivory, which had suffered badly both in the war and in the slump. By doing so he acquired very conseederable executive powers and from the very fir-rst he proved a dangerous and unbusinesslike pairson. Isn't that so, Miss Dorset?"

"Yes, from the beginning." The woman's voice stuck in her throat and came out hoarsely, so that they all looked at her.

"Mr Meyrick Ivory was deeply concairned, naturally," Bridie went on placidly. "In the airly days, when repeated cautioning proved of no avail, he did his best to — shall we say — divairt Mr Madrigal's attention and even persuaded him to take par-rt in an overseas chourney. When he retur-rned, however, he undid much of the good wor-rk which had been accomplished in his absence. His chief fault seems to have been chittering obstinacy. In most cases where a divairgence of opeenion occurs between two par-rtners chenerally one o' them raises capital to buy the other pairson out, and this Mr Ivory seems to have attempted several times in the past two years. Hooever, Mr Madrigal was always obstinate. Even in the face of his losses he stuck to his conveection that it was Mr Ivory's consairvatism and not his own unorthodox goings on which was lettin' the fir-rm doon. His wife implor-red him to be reasonable, but he refused and there the matter stood when Mr Ivory went to China. He had lechitimate and important business there, don't forget that. A very fine collection o' paintings on silk, the property o' the impeerial government, were aboot

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to come into the mar-rket and he was anxious to be on the spot. Meanwhile Mr Madrigal remained in charge. Wi' his senior par-rtner away he became more and more deeficult. He drew large sums out of the business, which we now see went directly to Lucar, and his cheneral behaviour caused conseederable alar-rm wherever it was understood."

His soft voice ceased for a moment, and he took out his watch and laid it on the table before him, so that the lid of the hunter case screened its face from the nearest of them.

"Well," he said, "there are few things more demoralising than to see one's bread and butter deleeberately wasted by a fool over whom one has no control. Some fools can be managed. They can be inveigled or startled into common sense. But there is one type o' fool who is impossible. By hook or by crook he has got hold o' the tiller o' the boat and his temperament is such that he'll run her on the rocks rather than let anyone else take a hand at steer-ring. That is the kind of fool who makes the meekest among us tur-rn to thoughts o' violence. A great fir-rm has as many traditions as a great school or a great regiment, and it often inspires the same kind of chealous loyalty. I only mention this because there were quite a number of pairsons intimately concairned with the fir-rm who knew the real state o' affairs. Miss Dorset knew, of course. So did Mrs Madrigal. And so did you, Mrs Ivory, unless I'm mistaken."

"Yes, I knew," said old Gabrielle quietly. "I knew."

If Bridie was pleased by the admission he did not show it. Like the famous heathen Chinese, whom he was beginning to resemble more and more at every dragging moment, his smile was childlike and bland.

"It wouldn't surprise me to hear-r that ye confided yer worries to your lifelong pairsonal attendant."

"I knew," said Dorothea stolidly and regarded him with unwinking eyes.

"And *you*." Bridie swung round on Norris. "You've been in sairvice here for twenty years. Mebbe the situation was not unknown to you."

Norris staggered to his feet. He was green with nervousness and his words slurred and bubbled over each other.

"I have enjoyed Mr Meyrick's confidence for a number of years, sir. I think I did know a little of — of the matter."

"Ha!" Bridie's eyes glanced from his own watch to the clock and back again. It was ten past three. "Mr Meyrick, he knew. Mr Meyrick Ivory knew. He was the principal pairson involved. He went off to China; that is to say he left England four-rteen weeks before Madrigal met his death. When I was a young man China was as far away as the stars, almost, and even noo a great many of us are inclined to think of it as a remote continent only vaguely connected with the Wester-rn hemispheere. However, with the coming of the new aeroplane

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

distance has ceased to exist, as ye might say. Let me read you a few interesting facts. By Impeerial Airways Hong Kong to Bangkok takes four-rteen hours only. From Bangkok to Calcutta the flying time is nine and a half. From Calcutta to Karachi is another nine hours, and it is possible to fly from Karachi to Southampton by ordinary passencher plane in less than three days. This is not evidence. It's chust another little bit o' the chigsaw which may not fit in with the rest and I only . . ."

"I protest."

The formal yet melodramatic objection from the other side of the room shook the already electric atmosphere with explosion force and they all turned to look at Miss Dorset, who had risen, her face patched red and white and her lips dangerously unsteady. In the moment of absolute silence which followed the telephone on the table beside her began to ring. Bridie smiled.

"Take yer call," he said.

They watched her as she took up the receiver and saw her hand tremble and the blank, frozen expression growing on her face as she listened.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, Miss Dorset here. Yes, I did enquire. Messrs Ivory Limited, Sallet Square. Yes. Yes. Yes. I see. Yes. Thank you."

She put down the receiver very slowly and the click of the disconnecting wires was heard clearly all over the room.

"Well?" Bridie enquired. "And did ye get your answer?"

She tried to speak but gave it up and nodded.

"And your suspeecions were correct?"

"I — I – Oh, I don't know. Don't ask me." Miss Dorset collapsed in her chair and covered her face with her hands.

Bridie regarded her with soft-eyed sympathy which might or might not have been genuine.

"Poor body," he said, adding almost without punctuation, "we noo have to conseeder the night o' the crime. The last pairson known to have seen Robert Madrigal alive is David Field."

Although she had been waiting for it the name jolted Frances unbearably and again she looked at the sunburst clock and saw that the gilt hands had reached the bottom of the circle and were creeping up again. Bridie glanced at her thoughtfully and continued, his sibilant accent caressing each word as it left his mouth.

"Ye all know what happened. Mr Field came to talk to Mr Madrigal about his engagement to Miss Frances Ivory and both men went into the garden room together where the blinds were not doon. What some of ye may not know is that Henry Lucar joined them there and he and Mr Field had a few wor-rds. Not unnaturally Mr Field objected to Henry Lucar's inclusion at such

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a delicate conference. Lucar had a wretched manner which charred on Mr Field's susceptibeelities and he disposed of him pretty sharply. Lucar went. Field is a for-rmidable pairson for all his arteestic profession, and the wee ratty Lucar soon took to his heels. What happened next is parteecularly interesting. Madrigal, frightened at the way Lucar had been treated, apprehensive because of the hold the man had over him, ye see, lost his heid entirely and said something to Field. I have the exact wor-rds here. According to the evidence which I have collected Madrigal tur-rned to Field and said: 'Ye've waited a long time for a woman wi' money and now ye're not taking any chances, are ye?' "

He paused and glanced round the room.

"Not a very nice obsairvation."

"My God, how like him," murmured Godolphin. "David hit him, I suppose?"

"He did." Bridie nodded his approval at the right answer. "He hit him on the chaw, scraping his own knuckles and putting the man clean out for an instant so that he fell on the floor. At least that's Field's story. But Miss Ivory herself, who happened to be in the yar-rd about that time or a few seconds after, said she saw the two of them standing talking. Would ye like to retract that statement, Miss Ivory? It's very clear why ye made it."

"Yes, I would." Frances made the admission huskily and Bridie nodded at Withers, who began to write.

The Scot went on.

"This method of sifting the pieces is unor-rthodox but it's remarkably effeecient. We're getting on verra nicely with our afternoon's divairsion," he observed. "The shape o' the heid is taking place before our eyes. To retur-rn to the two men in the garden room: there was Madrigal lying in the chair where Field had lifted him, a disfiguring contusion swelling up on his face. There was Field standing before him, looking down."

The phrase touched Frances through the numb wretchedness which was slowly consuming her. If David had not made a dash for it. If only he had done what even Godolphin saw was the intelligent thing and had stayed to face the enquiry. She looked at the clock again. Twelve minutes. Only twelve minutes.

Bridie was proceeding with his unhurried narrative.

"Accor-rding to his story Field went out into the hall and fetched Madrigal's hat and coat. He also tur-rned out the hall lights because they intended to go out the other way. Madrigal was naturally anxious not to be seen in his condeetion and Field was not keen on the story being broadcast either, for he was an impulsive chap wi' a reputation for hittin' oot. The arrangement was that they should go down to a doctor together to get the face patched up a bit. Field left the hat and coat in the room, pulled down the blinds, and then went upstairs to

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

say good night to his young lady, a fact which she corroborates. He was with her a matter of five minutes and then he came doon to the room again."

He paused and looked at them all consideringly.

"From this point," he said, "his story becomes very impor-rtant, because if it's not true then there's only one conclusion we can draw from his lying. He says his hand was already on the gar-rden-room door when he hear-rd Madrigal speaking to someone inside. The wor-rds were quite distinct and he remembered them. According to Field, Madrigal said, 'Why on airth did ye come here at this moment of all times?' I'll repeat the phrase. 'Why on airth did ye come here at this moment of all times?' Well, Field took it for granted that it was Lucar who had come back, and since, so he says, he'd become pretty fed up with the two of them, he went off home and left Madrigal to get his other friend to take him along to a doctor. That is Field's statement, and you may feel as I did, that it is highly unsatisfactory, but we mustna forget that Miss Ivory came running from the yar-rd because she thought there was someone out in the wee shed down there, and that someone could not have been Lucar, because of Miss Dorset's evidence. He was accounted for at that time. Still, Field admits that he handled the hat and coat and that is highly seegnificant. Field got the hat and coat out of the lobby across the hall. Noo, anyone might have seen him do that and this whole story might have been an invention of his to cover that conteengency. I can't get it out o' ma heid that the mur-rderer, whoever he or she was, saw in the absence of the hat an' coat a remarkably good way to ensure that the man would not be sairched for in the hoose. The mur-rderer threw the hat and coat into the cupboard after the deid man."

"No," said Gabrielle. She was always more alive at night, and now her fine hard voice was almost young. "No," she repeated. "Most of what you have said is excellent, Inspector. I congratulate you. But on that point you are wrong. I know that because I put the hat and coat over the poor wretched man myself."

"You didn't! You didn't! You don't mean it! You don't know what you're saying!"

Dorothea's outburst shook the room while it still was tingling, and the soft chatter of the ornate clock, racing to keep pace with time, was still loud in every ear.

The very old woman in the wing chair made a sound. It was a thin, soft tinkle of amusement, as if a ghost had laughed.

"Dear," she said cajolingly, "my dear, dear Dorothea, you don't think I killed the poor vulgar little man, do you? Both of them? I? Sit down. Sit down, Dorothea. The inspector is doing his puzzle and I must contribute my piece. I went downstairs that night. It was my first evening in my old home

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and I was restless. Dorothea left me sitting up by the fire and I began to remember all sorts of things, things that had just happened and things that had happened long ago. I was very angry with Robert. He had been very rude to me and I was worried about his attitude towards my girl Frances and that odious little camel man."

Her voice was clear and strong and very graceful, but she glanced up at the clock once or twice and frowned because her sight would not reach it. Bridie did not dare to interrupt her. She had shocked all the blandness out of him, and he stood looking at her as if he expected her to produce a cauldron and broomstick before his eyes.

"I got up and walked about my room first," she said. "I found I was much stronger than I had supposed and it occurred to me that I could move all over the house if I wanted to. God knows I knew it well enough. I made up my mind I'd go down to Robert and talk to him. Until then I had not felt strong enough to give him a serious lecture, but that night, after the quarrel in the afternoon, I felt quite capable of managing him or anyone else, so I went."

She paused and in their minds' eye they saw her, a little bundlesome figure in trailing woollen lace, bobbing lightly over the shining parquet floor.

"It was dark," said Gabrielle, "but I knew every inch of the dear old house and I paused in the hall to listen. It was quite silent, but I saw the garden-room door was open and that there was a light inside, so I went along there."

"God Almighty!" said Withers and shut his mouth with a snap immediately afterwards.

Gabrielle ignored him.

"I pushed open the door a little wider," she said, "and I went in. The blinds were down and at first I thought the room was empty. Then I saw the cupboard door was slightly open."

"Open? Are you sure of that, ma'am?"

Both policemen spoke at once and she glanced up at them disapprovingly.

"Yes, slightly open. I went over and looked inside."

She stopped and shook her head.

"Poor fellow," she said, adding typically, "so undignified and grotesque."

"Did you touch him?"

"I?" Her disdain made Bridie regret his question. "Of course not. It was perfectly obvious that the man was dead. His jaw had dropped. I've seen death too often to mistake it. I went across the room and sat down to think. It was a very awkward situation. I am an old woman. Frances is a young girl, and poor Phillida is a neurasthenic. Obviously none of us was capable of handling the scandal of a police enquiry. There was only one thing to do. I decided that Robert must wait until my son could return to see to things."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She made the outrageous statement with such simple egotism that no one doubted her for an instant. Of course that was what she had done. How exactly like her. In his astonishment Bridie forgot to look at the clock, while the little hand crept nearer and nearer to the top of the dial.

"It was then that I saw the hat and coat," Gabrielle continued calmly. "Naturally the idea occurred to me at once. Since the cupboard was normally empty presumably it was seldom opened, and if Robert vanished and his outdoor clothes went with him no one would look for him in the house. I carried the heavy coat across to the cupboard and went back for the hat and gloves. I placed them on his body quite reverently and then I closed the door, using my shawl to cover my fingers. I rested for a little while and then I went back to my room. When I switched off the light I used my shawl again. I remember I was quite clearheaded and I arranged with Dorothea to cable for Meyrick. I did not tell her about Robert. It seemed to me that the fewer people there were who knew about it the less morbid and unpleasant the situation became."

"But what a ghastly secret to keep to yourself all those days, ma'am!" Bridie was not reproachful so much as respectful.

Gabrielle met his eyes contemptuously.

"If you had lived when I did, my dear man," she said bitterly, "you'd have learned how to keep a great many hard secrets. That is what disgusts me about this present age. You have no mental discipline. A great many people sneer at the Victorians but no other period had our *face*."

"I believe you, ma'am," murmured Bridie fervently and would have continued had she not stopped him.

"Wait," she said. "I have not finished yet. Some of your puzzle is filled in, Inspector, but there are several important pieces which remain before we can all see this recognisable portrait you talk about. One of them is this. On the day that poor Robert's body was discovered by the servants the miserable little Lucar rushed away to America. At first the inference to be drawn from that behaviour seemed perfectly obvious to anyone who did not know how long Robert had been in the cupboard, but to me it was quite incomprehensible. If Lucar had killed Robert why had he not run away before? Then, as you have told us, it became apparent that Lucar could not have known of the discovery of the body at the time when he hurried out of the country. That does not explain everything. There remains one of your vital pieces, Inspector. Why did Lucar run away?"

The room was still quiet and Bridie was still looking at her when there came from the hall the sound which brought them all to their feet, their eyes on the clock. It was two minutes to four, and the deep voice in the hall outside was familiar to most of them.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Meyrick!"

Godolphin limped across the room and met the newcomer as the door swung wide. Meyrick Ivory came in alone, although there was the ominous gleam of silver buttons in the hall behind him. He was a heavy, wide-shouldered man with a shock of white hair and the smooth ruddy face of the squire rather than the Londoner. He kissed his daughter, nodded briefly to the policeman, and hurried to his mother's side.

"Oh, my poor little old girl," he said. "Oh, darling, how are you?"

The old Gabrielle looked up at him with the first sign of tenderness anyone had seen on her face. Her fine thin lips quirked.

"In full command, my boy," she said distinctly. "In full command."

Frances did not hear her. Ever since Bridie had made his dramatic references to the new facilities for air travel an appalling possibility had occurred to her. She glanced at the clock. It was almost four. The hand was within a fraction of the vertical. She looked at Bridie furtively. He was still watching the clock. Even while her eyes rested on him, however, he turned his head and glanced towards the door. It was opening quietly.

Two plain-clothes men appeared first and then, between them, pale and dishevelled, with a portfolio under his arm, came David. He looked round eagerly and, catching her eye, smiled wryly at her.

Gradually they all became aware of him. The babble of voices died abruptly and there was a long silence. Meyrick, standing by his mother's chair, raised his head and stared coldly at the little group. Bridie looked at David.

"Well?" he enquired.

David lifted his eyes, and they saw for the first time how deadly tired he was. He opened his mouth and made the most unexpected and incomprehensible reply.

"It was the one with the smallest moustache," he said.

The senior plain-clothes man nodded his agreement. "As I told you on the phone this morning, sir. We've got five good witnesses, with dates. The depositions are here with the pictures."

Bridie grunted his satisfaction and went over to the table where David had placed the portfolio. Gabrielle leaned forward.

"Inspector," she said, "I was asking a very pertinent question. Why did Lucar run away? What else happened on the day that Robert's body was found?"

Her voice cut through the general murmur and every face was turned towards her. Frances, her voice a youthful replica of Gabrielle's own, gave the answer like an echo.

"The papers came out with the news of Godolphin's rescue."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes," said Gabrielle softly. "Godolphin's rescue was announced. That's why Lucar ran away."

"That's an interesting theory but I don't follow it." Godolphin limped forward, his yellow face enquiring. "Why?"

"Chust possibly he was afraid of confr-rontin' you," remarked Bridie from the table. He had unfastened the case and was studying what appeared at a long view to be a large photograph. Suddenly he held it up and they all saw it. It was the head of a Hindu in European clothes but wearing a turban which had been painted on the gloss with process white. He had a little dark moustache, and at first glance the man was definitely Indian. However, there was something uncannily familiar about the attenuated lines of the cheeks and the narrowness of the eyes. Slowly every head in the room save one turned towards Godolphin. The exception was Mrs Sanderson. She remained gaping at the photograph and her triumphant cry shattered the silence, vindicating her obstinacy and airing her insular ignorance in one revealing second.

"The nigger!" she said. "There you are, what did I tell you? That's the nigger I saw."

Godolphin alone remained unimpressed.

"I see someone has been decorating my portrait," he said casually. "That's you, I suppose, Field? Very ingenious, my dear chap, but I don't suppose it proves much, does it?"

"Five people at the Dutch Line Amsterdam Airport recognised it as the passenger who arrived there on the day Robert was murdered, and who took the early five o'clock plane out again on the following morning," said David slowly. "I'm sorry, 'Dolly,' but you could have done it in the time."

Godolphin laughed.

"Can any European remember the difference between two Indians?" he enquired lightly.

Bridie did not frown but a shadow passed over his face and he beckoned to Miss Dorset.

"When the Nestor Traders' Protection Association phoned ye chust now in response to your enquiry what did they tell ye?" he demanded. "Don't be frightened. Tell it in so many words. Like one or two other people you became suspeecious when ye discovered that Mr Godolphin, who had left England penniless, had come home from an unsuccessful expedeetion with money enough for diamonds and expensive motorcars, so very sensibly ye put the Association on to him. What did ye find out?"

"I found," said Miss Dorset, speaking slowly and unsteadily, as if the words were forced from her, "I found that the Bank of India guaranteed him up to ninety thousand pounds, and — and had done so for some months on the surety

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of someone called Habib-Ul-Raput."

Godolphin whistled. The flippancy struck a false note, but he was still standing as jauntily as his infirmity would let him in the centre of the hearth-rug.

"Partly true," he said. "Raput Habib, of Penang, is a good friend of mine. I did him a service and he guaranteed me when I came home. The few months' story is an extra thrown in by your trade association friends for luck. Besides, while I admire your combined ingenuity, I'm afraid you're not going to get *my* face fitting into your blasted puzzle. Why on earth should I go to these energetic lengths to kill Robert in England? Believe me, if I'd wanted to do the tick in I should have had much more opportunity in Tibet. Hang it, I saved his life, didn't I?"

"Did you?" In spite of its quietness Gabrielle's question was menacing. "Did you? When I first heard that story of your heroism, Mr Godolphin, it struck me as a plagiarism. When I saw you again, again I wondered. In my time I have met the kind of man who sacrifices himself to save his friends, and he has not been your kind. He has been a great, simple-hearted, slightly sentimental sort of man, a hero, a pioneer; if I may use such an old-fashioned expression, a noble man; but he has never been a sharp-witted, clever, energetic man like you, Mr Godolphin. The story of your heroism was the story that Robert told. It was the kind of slavish imitation of the real thing which was typical of Robert."

The old voice faded, but as Godolphin bent towards her she went on again, gathering speed and strength.

"I wonder if the real story was not more like this? In the extreme situation which Robert painted far too vividly for it not to have been true, when you were a serious burden with your injured leg, when you had to be carried every step, when the natives showed dangerous signs of wanting to desert, when Robert's only support was the miserable Lucar, who was even more of a physical coward than he himself, I wonder if then, when you are said to have made your heroic sacrifice, I wonder if you did nothing of the kind."

Her voice sank again until they could only just hear it, a monotone of deadly common sense.

"I wonder if that story was a story of great heroism or a story of great cowardice. I wonder if Robert *left you*, Mr Godolphin. I wonder if Robert gave you a blanket and a tin or two of provisions and left you screaming to him in the snow. I wonder if he dragged Lucar on with him and when they returned to safety remembered the magnificent old story of gallantry to cover his cowardice. And I wonder if that was the hold which Lucar had over him, Mr Godolphin."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The man was gaping at her. There were little beads of sweat on his forehead beneath the line of his hair.

"Witchcraft," he said, but the laughter which should have been in the word was not convincing. "My God, a genuine witch at last! Well, even so, suppose you're right. Suppose by some misguided miracle you happen to have hit on something of the truth. Prove it! Prove he left me. Prove I starved and froze and rotted for three days before, by the grace of God, a gang of priests picked me up. Prove I won their confidence. Prove they nursed me. Prove they fitted out a new expedition and that I got to Tang Quing and came back over the pass with enough stuff to buy old Raput Habib for life. Prove I came to England with his papers after I had found that Robert had finished his fine work with a master stroke and had married Phillida. Prove that with Raput Habib's help I worked out a cast-iron scheme to pay him back what I owed him. Prove I hid in a shed in the yard. Prove I killed him. Prove I killed Lucar when he practically told the whole lot of you what he knew. Prove I killed Lucar after he whistled 'Little Dolly Daydream' to you until he was black in the face. Little Dolly Godolphin Daydream, the song that he tortured Robert with until to kill him was an act of Christian charity. Prove I killed him, Mrs Clairvoyant Gabrielle. What with?"

The man was in a state of ecstasy, drunk with his own words and his own impudent courage. His thin back was straight, his infirmity had disappeared, he used his hands as he talked, and as he finished his stick swung dangerously near her face.

A tiny hand shot out and caught the ferrule, twisting it sharply to the left.

"I've been wondering about this for twenty-four hours. My husband had one," whispered the old Gabrielle, and Godolphin started back from her with two feet of shining swordstick in his hand.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE BEST POLICEMAN in the world, and Bridie privately accredited himself with that distinction, is not prepared for a conjuring trick at the psychological moment of arrest.

For the brief part of a second Godolphin was at an advantage and he took it. He reached the door and got it open before they leapt on him and Frances heard for the third time the sharp, quick, purposeful footsteps which had made such an indelible impression on her mind.

Norris, who was nearest, stuck out a foot to trip him and received a flick

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

which laid open his upper arm to the bone for his trouble. The two men on duty in the hall came for the fugitive with their bare hands, as their discipline so inconsiderately demands.

The younger, a heavy lout new-recruited from the Wolds, snatched at the weapon and lost a finger. The older and more experienced tried a rugby football tackle but was dodged by a man who knew the game as well as he did, and Godolphin gained the square.

His fortnight's enforced limping had not impaired his natural agility and he took the steps lightly. Petrie, of the *Courier*, might have stopped him, for he was directly in his path, but he had his own affairs to attend to and by refraining he obtained one of the finest news photographs of the year and a pictorial scoop for his paper.

It was the crowd who defeated Godolphin, and the symbolism of that defeat was horribly right and just. His sin was against them, and the civilisation which made their existence possible. In a civilised world murder is a crime against the public and the man who commits it is public property, doomed to public justice and public punishment.

When Godolphin appeared on the top of the steps the crowd by the railings opposite were stolidly silent, lost in that state of morbid contemplation which is so incomprehensible to the individual.

No crowd of this type is quick witted, and the wiry figure had cleared the steps and plunged down the pavement towards the lights of St. James before they grasped the significance of his appearance. However, the moment one individualist among them came to life and leapt out into the roadway the entire pack was galvanised as by a single electric shock. The roar, which is primitive and hideous and like no other sound in the world, went up from them and they surged in to pursuit.

They never caught him. The Piccadilly traffic did that as he made a wild dash through it to reach, so the papers said afterwards, the car showrooms on the opposite side of the road. The story at the time was that he was attempting to duck into the doorway unseen by his pursuers and afterwards to escape in the car for which he was already negotiating, but that was only a theory. Whatever the truth was, the traffic got him. It swept down the greasy road like an avalanche of red and gold; busses speeding to keep to schedule, little black taxicabs as mobile as flies on a ceiling and very like them, three-ton delivery trucks and a shoal of private cars.

He was dead two seconds after he left the pavement. The two busses shrieked and swayed and brushed one another in a hail of breaking glass as the hatless figure rebounded from the radiator of the first and pitched beneath the double wheels of the second.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The avalanche was still for a minute or two and the crowd pressed forward shyly.

. . . . . .

Frances and David went for a walk that night.

By eleven o'clock 38 Sallet Square was comparatively peaceful. Meyrick and Miss Dorset were still over at the gallery in conference with the head of the accounts department. Nurse King was nodding over a book in Phillida's room. Norris was in the kitchen nursing his wounded arm and submitting to the ministrations of Molly and Mrs Sanderson. Gabrielle lay in her monstrous bed beneath the tapestry and Matthew, Mark, Luke and John blessed her with their needlework smiles, while Dorothea muttered mingled prayers for her deliverance and imprecations at the fate which should have had the impudence to decree that she should ever have been in any danger.

The walk was David's idea and Frances was grateful to him for it before they had been out of the house ten minutes. Walking is a great sedative and the peace and solidity of an old city at night tends to make personal affairs, however terrible, seem small beside such ancient tranquillity.

The sky had cleared and it was mild, with stars over the spires, and in the air a strange damp exhilaration which is peculiar to London.

They walked along in silence for a long time, heading down the Haymarket to Whitehall and the river. It was quiet once they left the theatre centre, and they walked on wide pavements which they had practically to themselves.

"Poor old 'Dolly,' " David said suddenly. "You can almost forgive him, you know. He had great provocation. And guts too," he added after a pause. "Terrific guts. The Lucar killing needed something like nerve. He must have taken Phillida upstairs and gone straight along to Gabrielle's empty room, walked through the cupboard, done his work and come calmly out again the same way, ambling downstairs to try the Packard. We forgot how well he knew the house. Phillida must have guessed. Did she?"

"I think so." Frances spoke soberly. "I think Gabrielle got it out of her that time she sent the nurse away. I think that's how she knew so certainly. You knew too, didn't you?"

"Yes," he said. "I knew. I knew he'd killed Robert. I knew that night when we were all at the Marble Hall. He accused me. Do you remember? He worked himself up, described the scene, and suddenly gave himself away by referring to Robert's grey lock flapping in his eyes. I was so startled that I thought he'd seen my face. Robert went grey in the last six months of his life. He told me so. Besides, I saw it myself. He was bleaching before one's eyes." He shook his head. "That whistle on the telephone was a damnable torture of Lucar's. Any-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

way, as soon as 'Dolly' mentioned the grey hair I knew that he was describing a picture that he'd really seen. I didn't know what to do. I was appallingly sorry for Phillida and scared stiff generally. It put me on the idea, of course. I began to work out how he could have done it, and it was so abominably easy once one accustomed one's mind to the size of the scheme. I knew he did speak all these border dialects, and it dawned on me that if he had somehow got out of Tibet with something really worth having there was no reason why he shouldn't have lain low for a bit while he disposed of the stuff and turned it into cash. In the course of this he could easily have heard the story of his own heroic death and Robert's marriage and have sneaked back into the country, done his killing and roared back again in time to take part in a grand resurrection ceremony, the details of which he had arranged beforehand. There were no Imperial Airways sailing on the day after the murder, but as soon as I looked into the Dutch Air Line arrangements the whole thing became staggeringly clear. He could do it in six days."

He paused and shook his head.

"Lucar's return pulled me together," he said, "and as soon as I saw what was going to happen there I knew I must get busy. I was hours and hours too late, of course."

"I saw you," she remarked unexpectedly. "I saw you leave the gallery just as the excitement started. Just as Lucar's body was discovered."

"Did you? That shook the Duchess up a bit, didn't it?" He was grinning at her with his old lazy sophistication and she felt comforted. "I'd been down to the framing department. The foreman there has a very fine collection of celebrities pinned up on the wall and I thought he might have a better photograph of Godolphin than the two or three I'd got from the news agency. However, I wasn't lucky and I had to use what I had. It was a simple, rather childish idea. Working on the theory that when Mrs Sanderson said 'nigger' she might easily mean a high-caste Hindu whose ancestors were discussing theology while her own were still leaping from twig to twig, I simply took out my box of paints and decorated half a dozen press photographs of 'Dolly' with various turbans and fancy moustachings. It was hardly a disguise at all. That's why it was so successful. He was quite right when he said what European can tell the difference between two Indians. The ordinary casual observer simply sees a dark chap in a turban. Well, I was in the thick of my art work when the police came round with the news about Lucar and started asking a lot of suspiciously intimate questions. I was jittering with terror. I'm no hero, you know. I spilt every bean I had. I think they believed me in the end. Old Cholly Good Chob did anyway, when they brought me round to see him in the gallery, or he wouldn't have let me go in to Gabrielle through the cupboard. He was listening through

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the door, you know. I think she knew he was there. However, he wouldn't hear of me going off to the Dutch airport to verify my theories. That's why I had to cut and run for it. He wanted to talk to Mrs Sanderson first. I told him it was too damned dangerous, with 'Dolly' going berserk in the place, and I think he must have seen that although he didn't admit it."

"Did they trace you?"

"No, I don't think they even missed me. That was rather degrading. They knew I'd gone into the house and presumably hadn't come out. When they did find I'd gone they broadcast a description, but I phoned Bridie as soon as I landed at the Amsterdam Airport, just to be on the safe side, you know. He sent a couple of men over by the morning plane and they did the dirty work, interviewing the stewards and so on. Bridie wasn't certain of his proofs against 'Dolly.' That's why he was waiting to have a showdown the moment we got back with the deposition. He seems to have kept you all amused in the meanwhile in his own inimitable way. We were all expecting fireworks, but I didn't envisage anything like Gabrielle's sensational performance with the swordstick."

Frances shivered.

"That was incredible," she murmured. "As soon as that had happened the whole thing slid into focus. Godolphin never let the stick out of his hand, you see, and as long as one thought he was lame it wasn't extraordinary. He even had it with him that night he invented the burglar."

"When Lucar came?"

"Lucar?"

"Oh, lord, yes, that was Lucar. Didn't you know? The police did. 'Dolly' must have had a phone message from him while we were still at the police station. It was 'Dolly' who left the yard door open for him. That's how he got in. He went into the garden room, opened the cupboard door just to make sure — you know how one does — pulled a chair up and was settling down to wait. I imagine he had some sort of idea of putting the screws on 'Dolly' then. However, he mucked his entrance. Norris heard him and ran into 'Dolly' going downstairs. He bunked and 'Dolly' had to stage the burglary scene by kicking over the gong. Lucky for Lucar, I should say."

They had come to the end of the street and he pulled her arm through his as they crossed the empty square.

"Where did Godolphin get it?" she said, her mind running on over the tragedy. "I thought they were unheard of nowadays."

"Swordsticks? No. That's what I thought, but apparently they're not. I put that question to Withers tonight when he called and he says he's been making enquiries this evening and he finds to his horror that you can buy 'em in every

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

umbrella shop in the city. They cost anything from fifty bob to fifty quid, and the average small branch store still sells about thirty-five a year. It gives one to think, doesn't it? I shall eye every old boy with a malacca with deep respect in future."

They reached the bridge and paused to look over the parapet. Big Ben blinked down on them and the coloured advertisement signs from upriver stained the water below. They remained there for some time and presently David turned his head.

"Well?" he said.

"Well?"

"It's on our minds, isn't it, ducky?"

It was pointless to misunderstand him and she laughed.

"I suppose so."

"What are you going to do? Invest your Poor Mama's Fortune in the Grand Old Firm and bestow yourself on the Lowly But Not Impoverished Painter, setting forth in April for a New World with the Dawn in its Radiance beckoning you to a Fresh and Glowing Love Life?"

Frances considered him. He was abominable.

"You'd have the shock of your existence if I didn't," she said and her eyes were as confidently mocking as his own.

THE END

Coming soon — another Bestseller Mystery — "The Department of Queer Complaints," by Carter Dickson. "The best bedside collection that has shown its head for many a day." *The New Yorker.*

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

★ *Mercury Mysteries* ★

FOR CHRISTMAS . . . You can choose any of these 14 selected titles and be sure that your friends will enjoy them for the speed, the pace, and the surprise of good detective fiction.

52. THE UNICORN MURDERS
by *Carter Dickson*

"A joyous jolt for the jaded mystery reader." Philadelphia *Enquirer.*

53. CARDS ON THE TABLE
by *Agatha Christie*

". . . there is nobody quite like Agatha Christie when she puts her mind to it and that's what she has done in *Cards on the Table.*" Will Cuppy, New York *Herald Tribune.*

54. THE GOLDEN SWAN MURDER
by *Dorothy Cameron Disney*

"Here is another winner by the author of *Death in the Back Seat* and *Strawstack*— even better than those memorable tomes. . . ." Will Cuppy, New York *Herald Tribune.*

55. RED GARDENIAS
by *Jonathan Latimer*

"Fast, crisp, tough and thoroughly entertaining." New York *World-Telegram.*

56. THE D. A. DRAWS A CIRCLE
by *Erle Stanley Gardner*

"Hair trigger action and capable deducing right up the Gardner path." New York *Herald Tribune.*

57. THE DRAGON'S TEETH
by Ellery Queen

"Expertly told and recommended without a qualm." *The New Yorker.*

58. THE CASE OF THE DANGEROUS DOWAGER
by *Erle Stanley Gardner*

"One notch above top." *Saturday Review of Literature.*

B25. PARTNERS IN CRIME
by *Agatha Christie*

"She's probably the best suspicion scatterer and diverter in the business." New York *Herald Tribune.*

B27. CAIRO GARTER MURDERS
by *Van Wyck Mason*

"Top-notch." *Saturday Review of Literature.*

B28. THE TRAGEDY OF Y
by *Ellery Queen*

Hailed by critics as the logical successor to Sherlock Holmes.

B29. MURDER UP MY SLEEVE
by *Erle Stanley Gardner*

". . . ingenious and exciting." William Lyon Phelps.

B30. THE MAN WITH NO FACE
by *Margaret Armstrong*

"All the more interesting for being so different." New York *Times.*

B31. SOME BURIED CAESAR
by *Rex Stout*

"Witty, informative, original . . . you'd better get yourself a copy right quick." New York *World-Telegram.*

B32. THE SEVEN DIALS MYSTERY
by *Agatha Christie*

Few mystery writers have succeeded so consistently as Agatha Christie in baffling the reader and at the same time delighting him.

CHRISTMAS GIFT RATES

4 Books *for* $1.00 • 8 Books *for* $2.00 • All 14 Books *for* $3.00

SINGLE COPY 25 CENTS NO CHARGE FOR POSTAGE

Each Christmas gift order will be holiday wrapped — and a handsome gift announcement inscribed with your name will be enclosed. Mail order early.

Send *Mercury Mysteries* as Christmas Gifts in my name to the names below. B33

I enclose $..... in full payment.

Name ..... Fill in Book Nos. ....
Address ....
City and State ....

Name ..... Fill in Book Nos. ....
Address ....
City and State ....

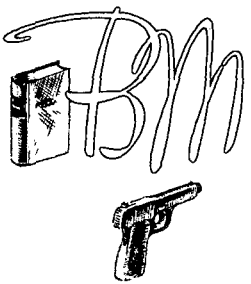
SENT BY ..... Fill in Book Nos. ....
Address ....
City and State ....

MERCURY MYSTERIES • 570 LEXINGTON AVENUE • N. Y. CITY

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED